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ALL
AFTER
CLEAN
BOOK THREE

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A.D.: After Death created by Scott Snyder & Jeff Lemire

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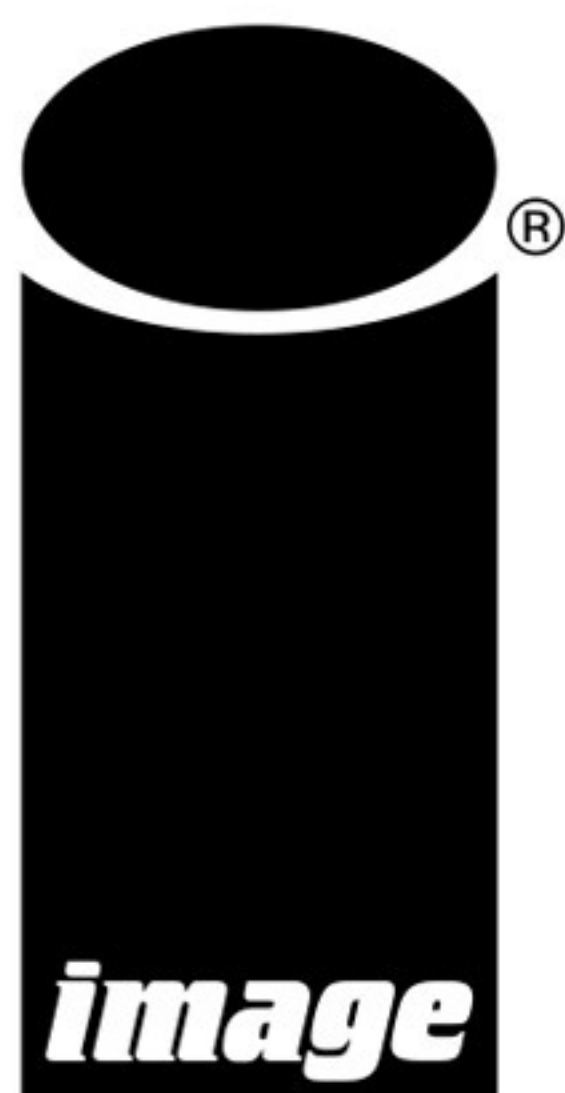


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I was once
asked to steal
a forbidden
color.

A forbidden color is a hue that doesn't exist on the known spectrum. It doesn't occur in nature, and it's not mixable digitally. It's a new color. Something beyond our perception.

The color I was supposed to steal was housed in a small steel box, on top of which was a scope. The box was made at a university near Barrow, Alaska, and I actually went there to get it myself. The whole time I was in Barrow, the sun never broke through the clouds, just moved back and forth behind them like a child trying to peek through a dirty window.

What the box did, when you looked through the scope on top, was stimulate your retina's cones by means of a fractional laser--this laser would literally energize your cone cells so they would be able to see beyond the highest frequency/shortest wavelength values on the spectrum, be able to see JUST past that final reef of violet to the other side.

I was not allowed to look at the color; this was apparently very important to the Head of Table. He (or she) explained that this was because the laser inside the box relied on materials that were diminished with each use, and so any use of the laser would reduce the value of the box, and, subsequently, the color itself. And more than this, it wasn't perfected yet.

The box was about six inches by six inches, and the walls had black rubber rivets along the edges. There was a little leather cover over the scope, like a bird's hood.

I kept looking at it sitting there, this little box buckled in with a lap belt, as I drove the bleak roads, the Interstates, making my way south. The box was worth a small fortune. I tried to picture the color inside, see past the waves crashing against purple. I wondered if it'd change me, change my neurology, seeing this color. Burn new pathways in my brain. What if seeing it, something that wondrous and secret, would energize my cells, my core, my hands? What if it was a step towards--

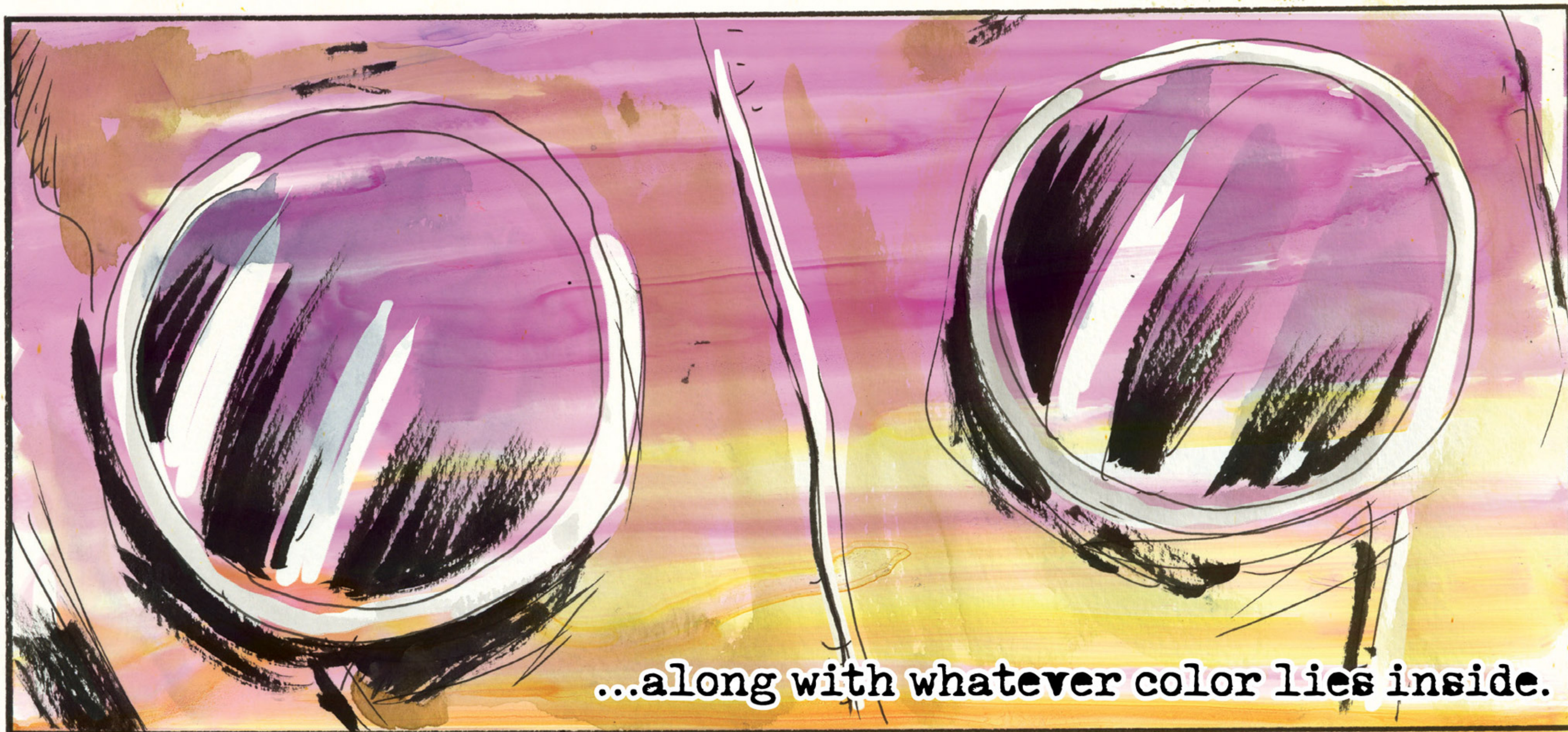
The blast of a horn shook my car, and I yanked the wheel as an oncoming logging truck roared past.

In the end, I did not look into the box. I did as I was asked and delivered the box to a port in Seattle and handed it off.

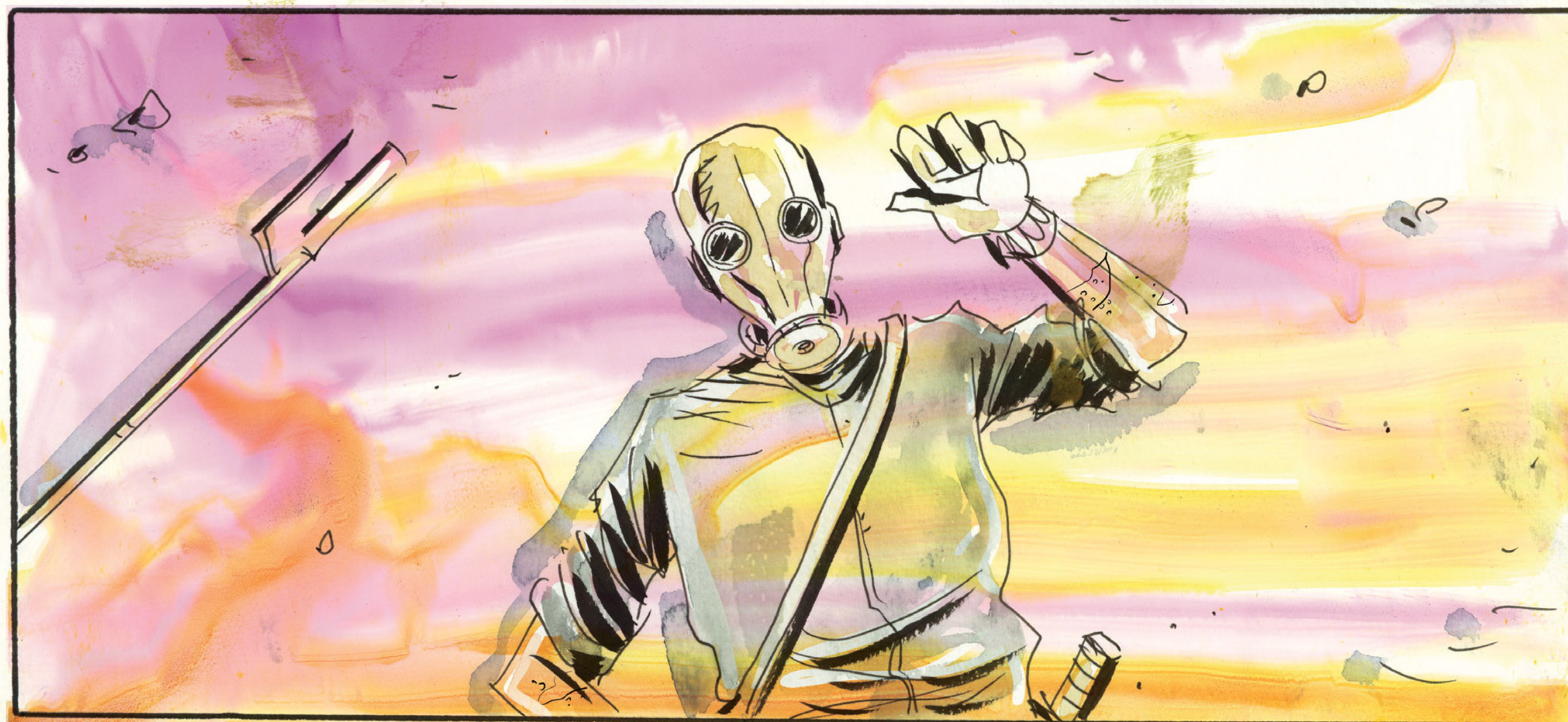
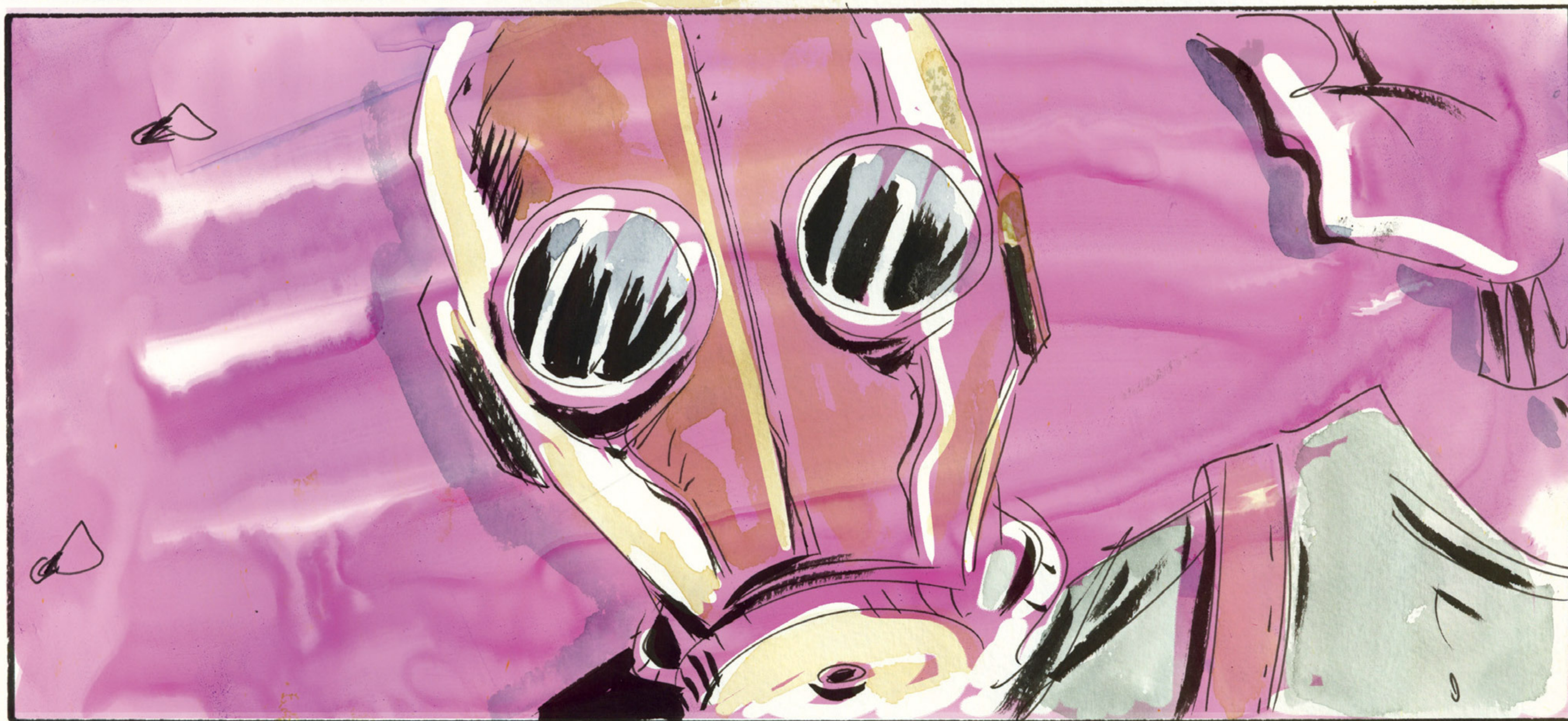
The box, or some variation of it, would find its way to the marketplace soon, when the technology was better, and I'd see this color in its true form then.

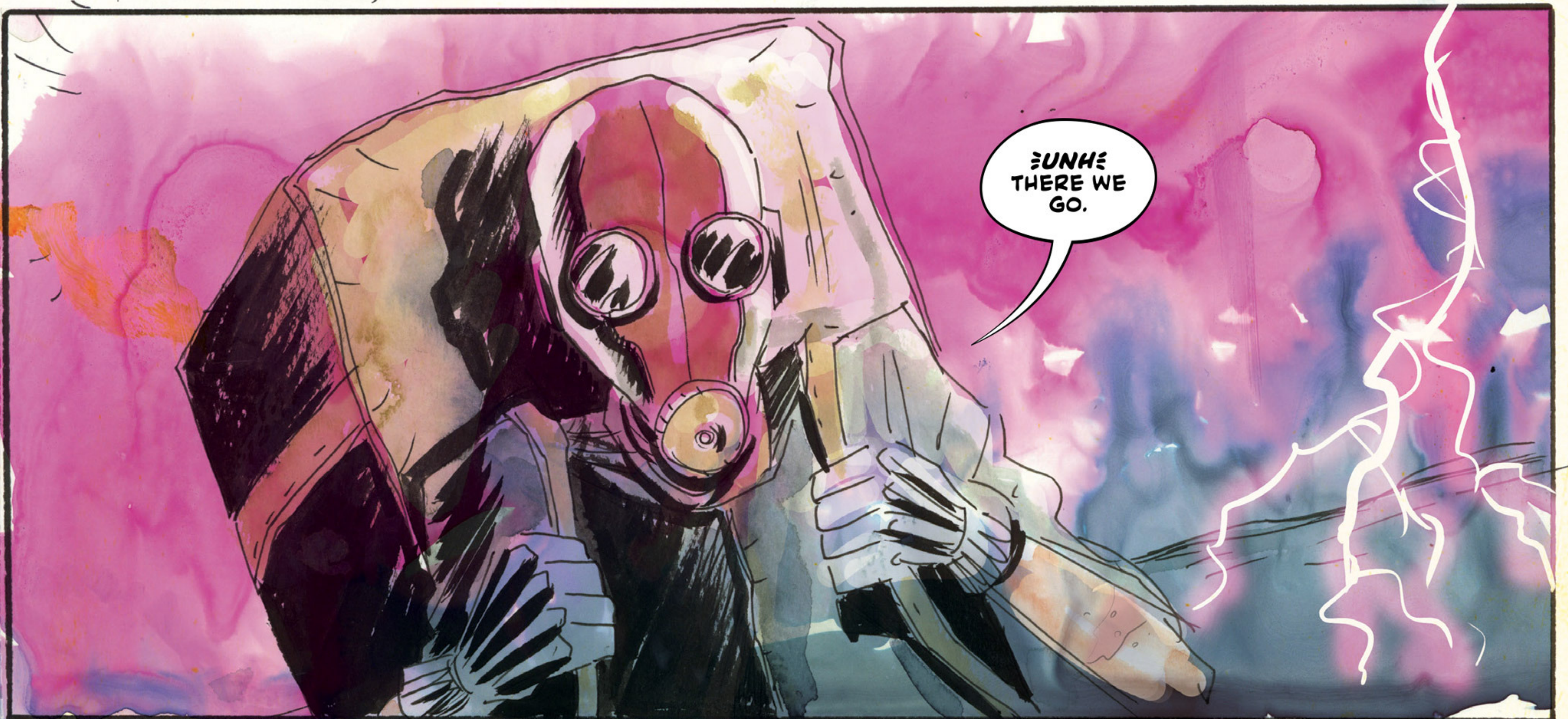
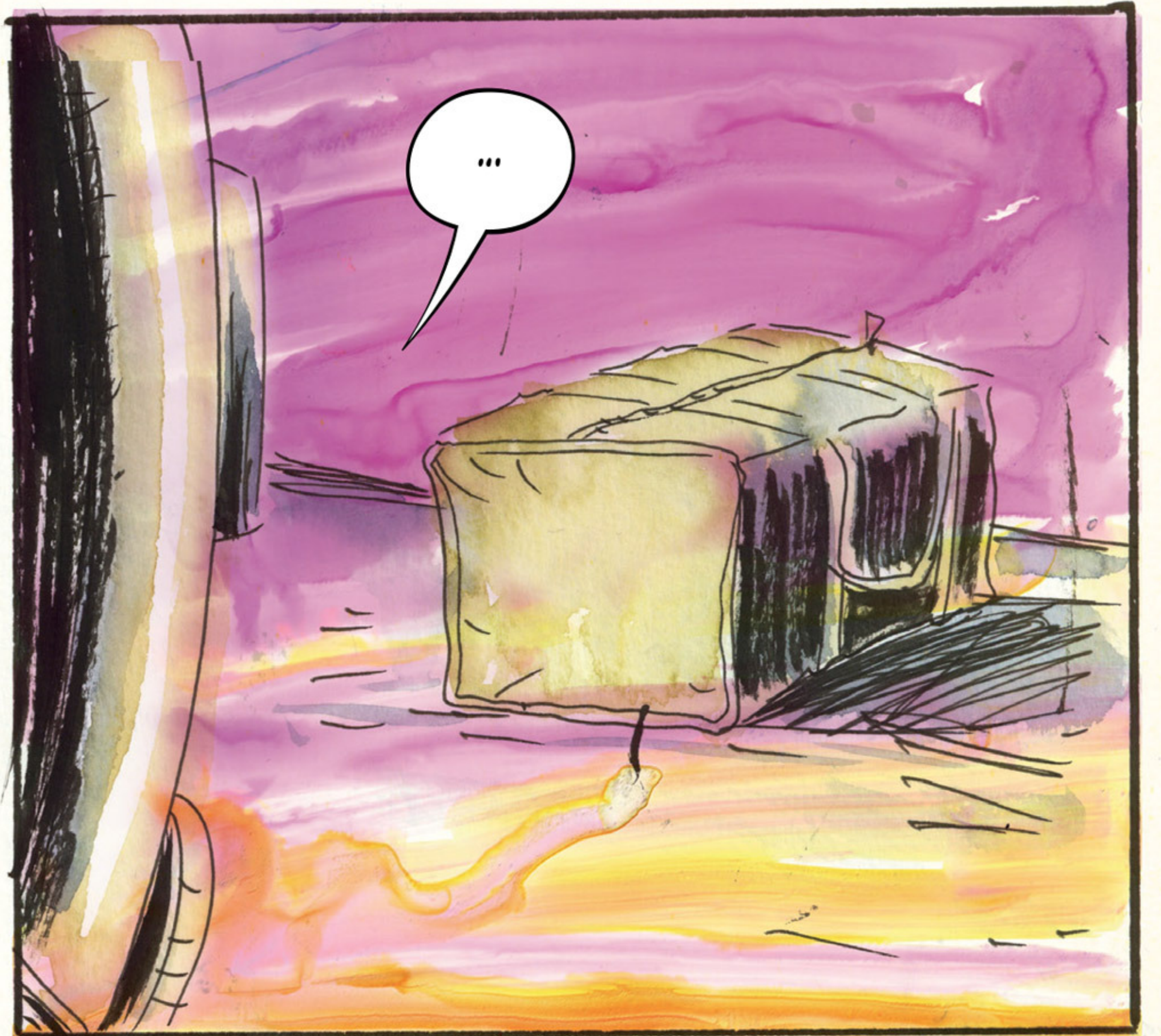
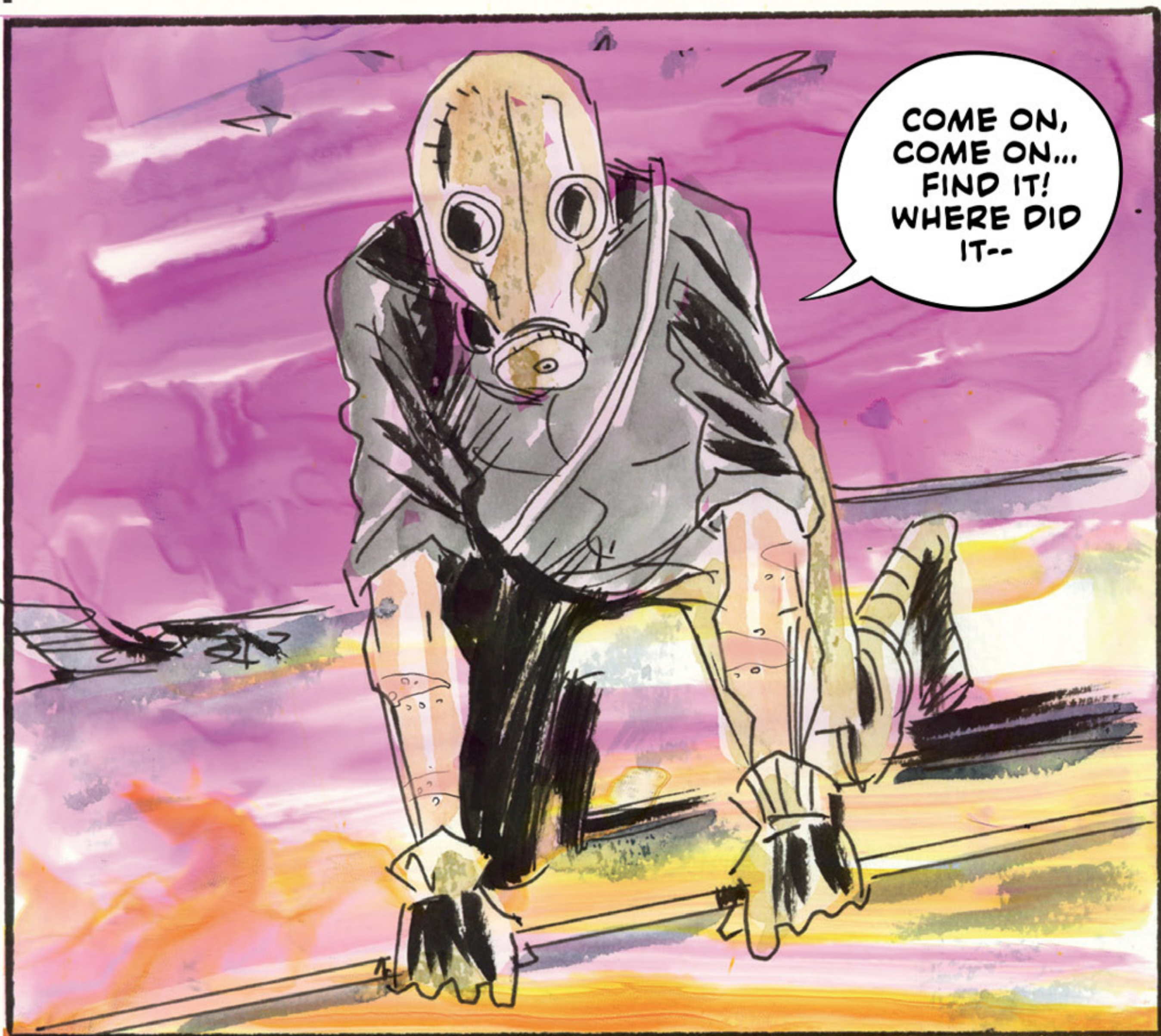
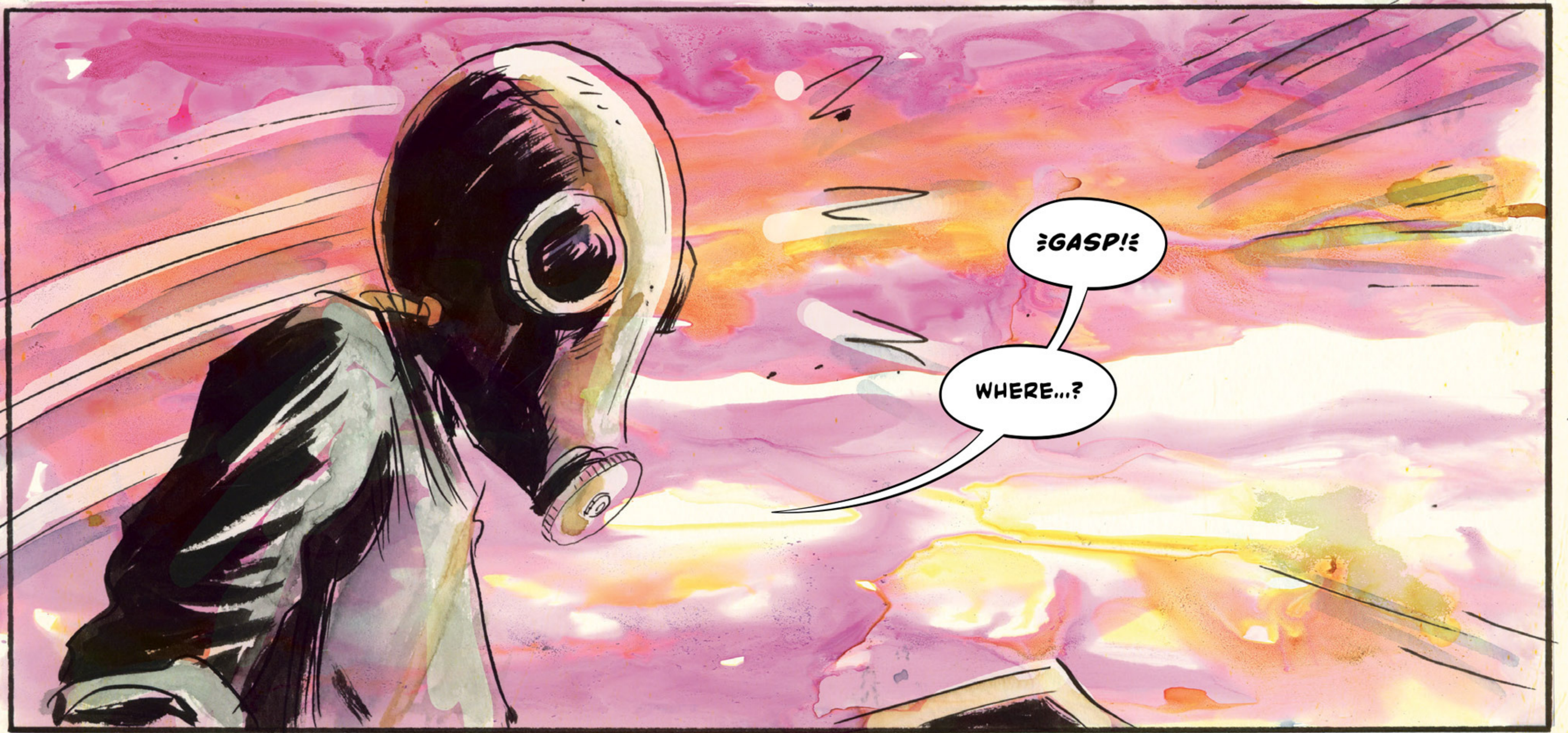
But I never heard of the box or the color inside again.

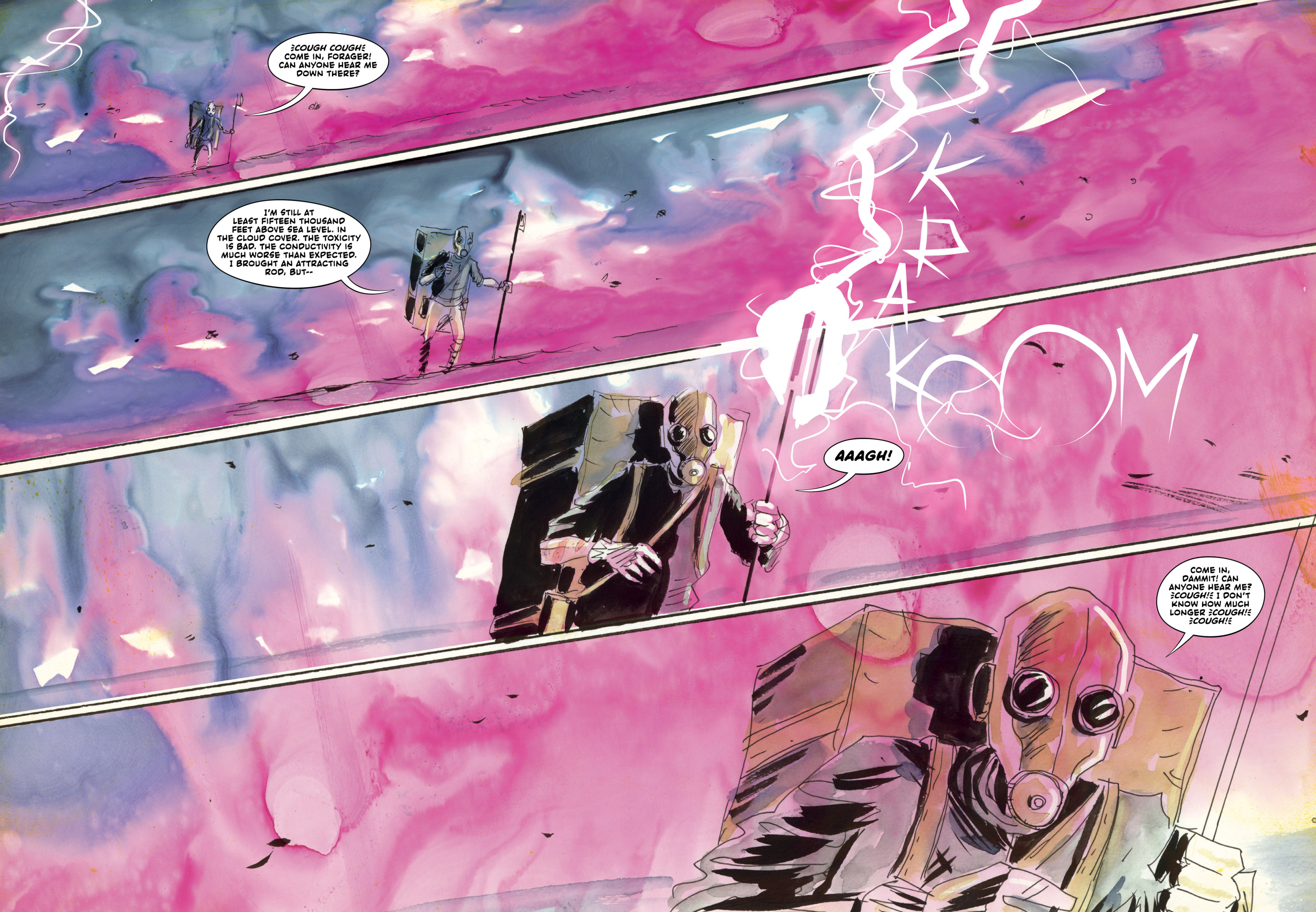
Instead, the world ended, and, I imagine, the box went with it...



...along with whatever color lies inside.





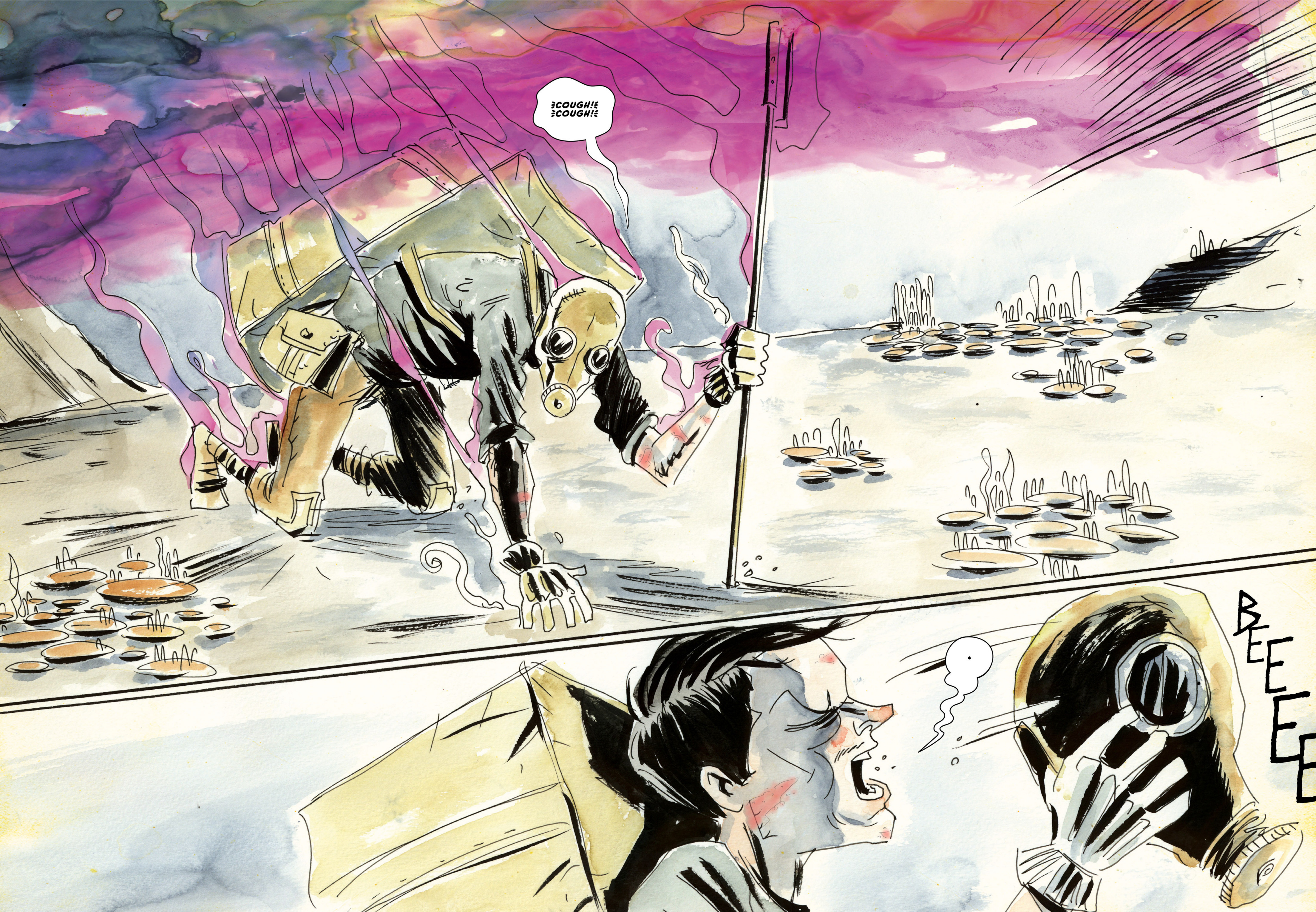


COUGH COUGH!
COME IN, FORAGER!
CAN ANYONE HEAR ME
DOWN THERE?

I'M STILL AT
LEAST FIFTEEN THOUSAND
FEET ABOVE SEA LEVEL. IN
THE CLOUD COVER, THE TOXICITY
IS BAD. THE CONDUCTIVITY IS
MUCH WORSE THAN EXPECTED.
I BROUGHT AN ATTRACTING
ROD, BUT--

AAAGH!

COME IN,
DAMMIT! CAN
ANYONE HEAR ME?
COUGH! I DON'T
KNOW HOW MUCH
LONGER COUGH!
COUGH!





EEEEEEEEE

OH NO,
NO, NO,
NO.

COME ON,
COME ON...
WE'RE TOO
CLOSE! WE'RE
NEARLY--



...
FORAGER!
COME IN,
FORAGER!
HELP US!

EEEEEEEEEE



PART THREE
FORAGER STATION

This is the part of the story that
I don't like telling.



But it's the most important part.

The part I promised myself
I'd never erase.

The girl's name is CLAIRE.

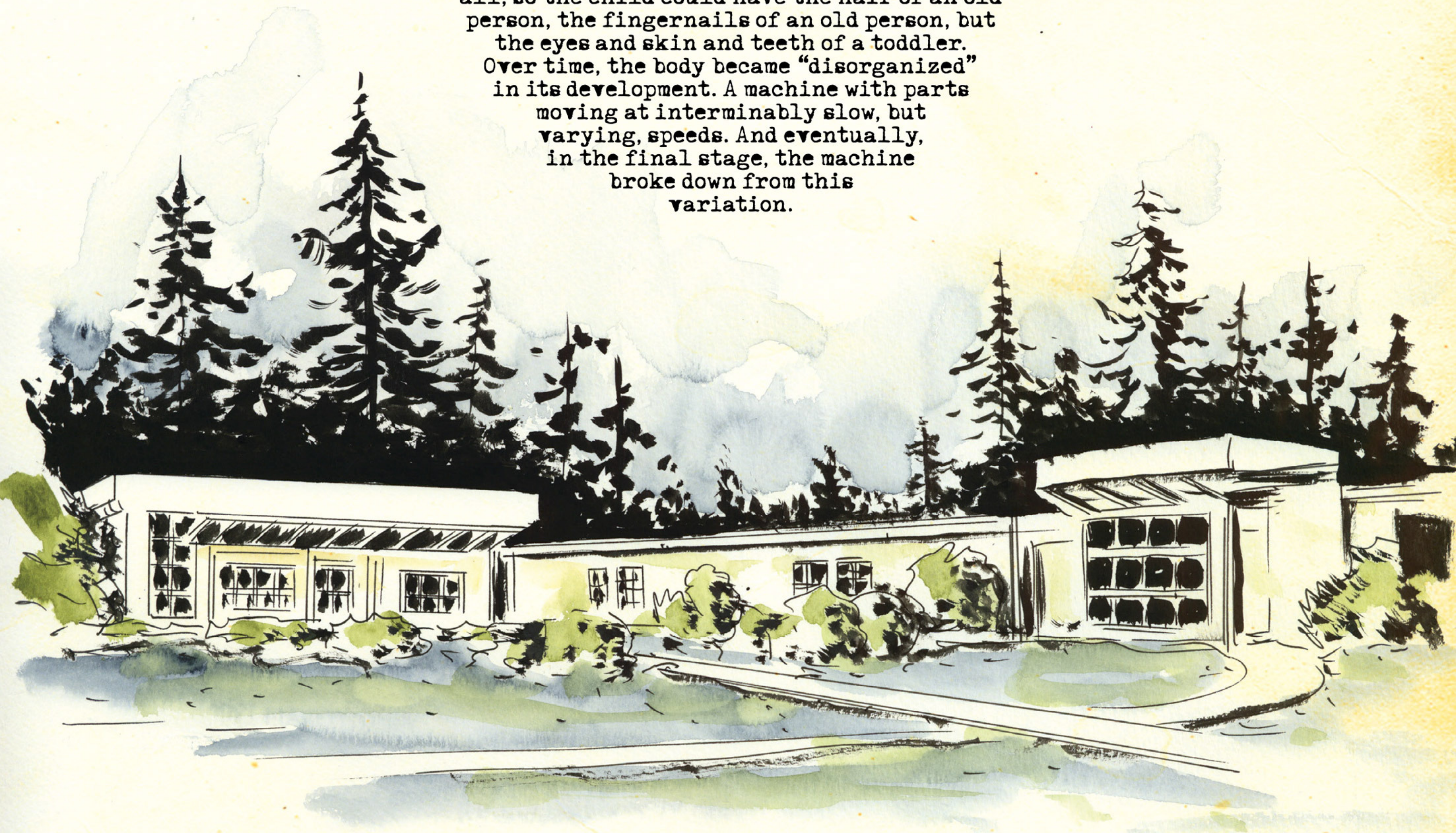
I first laid eyes on her one month after Errant visited me at Modern Home.

At the time, Claire was living in a children's hospital in Nova Scotia called Heartwell House, a place for kids with debilitating disorders, most of them terminal.

It was affiliated with the nearby university hospital, but was set apart, deep in the woods. A sort of grim outlier station tucked away in the heavy pines of that area. A place no one wanted to ever see or visit.

The realm of children's maladies is ugly, to say the least. The ugliest. And at a facility like Heartwell, you got the sense that nature reserved her worst afflictions just for children. For example, there was a boy at this hospital with something called FOP, Fibrodysplasia Ossificans Progressiva, a syndrome that caused his muscles and ligaments to gradually turn to bone. He was essentially growing a second skeleton over his own, day by day, a slow, creakingly painful and immobilizing process. There was a girl with Epidermolysis bullosa, or "butterfly disorder," a condition that destroyed collagen between skin cells so that the layers of skin rubbed together whenever she moved and tore apart like tissue paper. In short, the place was like a laboratory for cooking up extreme kinds of pain and suffering.

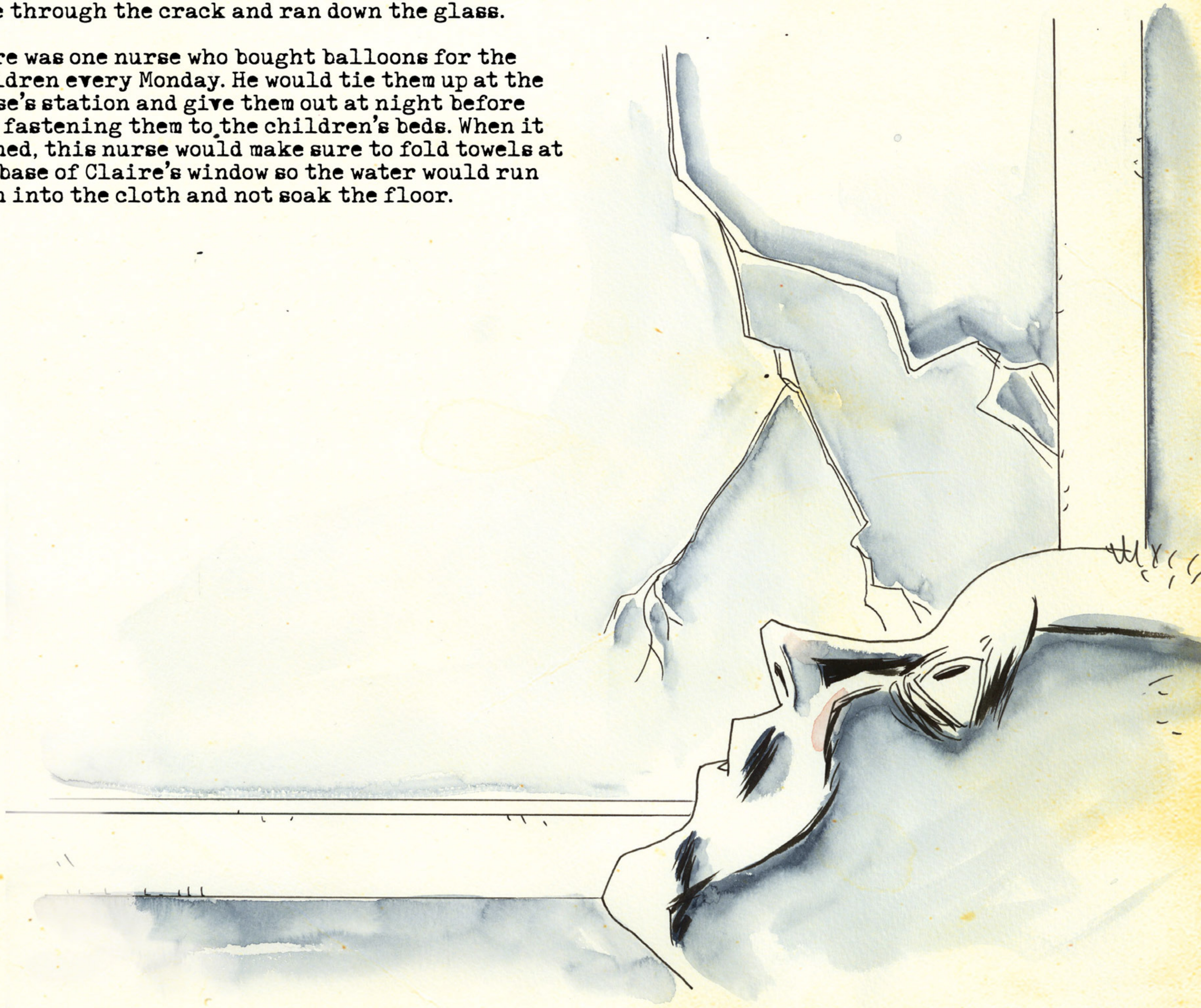
The disorder Claire had was called Neotenic Complex Syndrome, and there were only two other children in the world known to have it. It was a genetic malfunction that actually stopped its host from aging. Not entirely, but for a long while. What happened was that at some point, usually around three or four years old, the complex of genes responsible for senescence--for aging--would seem to shut off, go full dark, so the child would suddenly stop developing and become frozen in time. Siblings younger than them would pass them by, lap them in the race of life. The affected child might be twenty years old, more, but look age four. The secret about the disorder, though, was that the affected child was never fully frozen in time, not really. The aging switch never truly shut off; it remained on, albeit barely, and the terrible thing was that the slowed effect caused different parts of the child's physiology to age at different rates. The brain was usually slowest, never making it past a few years' development. Organs were slow too, with some aging more quickly than others. Your liver might outpace your stomach, which was already outpacing your kidneys...and so on. Some components, like hair and nails, barely slowed at all, so the child could have the hair of an old person, the fingernails of an old person, but the eyes and skin and teeth of a toddler. Over time, the body became "disorganized" in its development. A machine with parts moving at interminably slow, but varying, speeds. And eventually, in the final stage, the machine broke down from this variation.



Claire had reached this final stage when I first saw her. Without intubation, she was likely no more than a few weeks from dying. She was nearly forty years old, almost exactly my age, but she looked like a sickly eight, maybe nine, with spindly limbs and deep, sunken eyes.

Her story was sad. She'd been put up for adoption at birth, become a ward of the state, and lived her life in federally funded facilities. She had neurological issues, cognitive issues, had never developed psychologically...She didn't move much, didn't talk, seemed barely there; it had been a life unlived, now ending. She spent her days in a bed near a window with a crack in it. When it rained, drops of water came through the crack and ran down the glass.

There was one nurse who bought balloons for the children every Monday. He would tie them up at the nurse's station and give them out at night before bed, fastening them to the children's beds. When it rained, this nurse would make sure to fold towels at the base of Claire's window so the water would run down into the cloth and not soak the floor.



Looking at Claire, I felt like I was seeing it square on, confronting it all over again. This was what no one liked to look at, but where it all led. To a room like this, with a crack in the window, a cold, wet towel bunched on the sill, catching dirty rain. I couldn't help thinking of my brother, Nathan, who'd been created with no chance of escaping the dying system that contained him. I thought of my mother, that moment toward the end of her life when she'd thought Nathan had been born, thought that I was married with a family...how happy she'd been...

...then the terror when she'd seen the truth.

I thought of it all--the whole thing, the dumb, mindless cruelty of it, the black water, the way it closes around the ankles of some people, the way it had stopped my mother and my brother and my father, and me and how fear of it seemed to be creeping into the world itself every day, more and more; no stopping it with sunken train cars, no stopping it with metal detectors, or any of it, and I decided I would do this thing.

This was it. This was the door to it all. Not just for me, or for Claire, but for everyone. I could steal us all by stealing her. I would do this.

But how?

How to get her out? That was the issue.

The facility was always busy, and there were cameras, there was security. I knew I could secure a van with the equipment needed to move Claire, but I didn't have a way of getting her out without incident.

There was only one moment all week when she was in a room with an easy access point--a room with a fire door--and this was when she went for dialysis. More often than not, the attendant would leave her alone in there for stretches of time. But the fire door was

heavily alarmed and had no unlocking mechanism I could slip from the outside. The only way to open it was to set off the facility's fire alarm system, which would trigger all the fire doors to unlock. Then maybe in the mayhem I could sneak Claire out. But alarms aren't easy to trigger without real fire, real smoke. I could just go in and light a match under one at the right time, but all the alarms were in public view. Recorded too...I'd likely be tackled on the spot, certainly chased down after the fact. I could go home, try to get a bug that could trigger it. But I was worried that Claire might die in the interim.

Every day, she looked worse.



There was a small museum of regional history nearby, and sometimes I'd go there to wander around and think on the problem. The place was dark and winding and full of taxidermy creatures from the surrounding forest, like flying squirrels and porcupines.

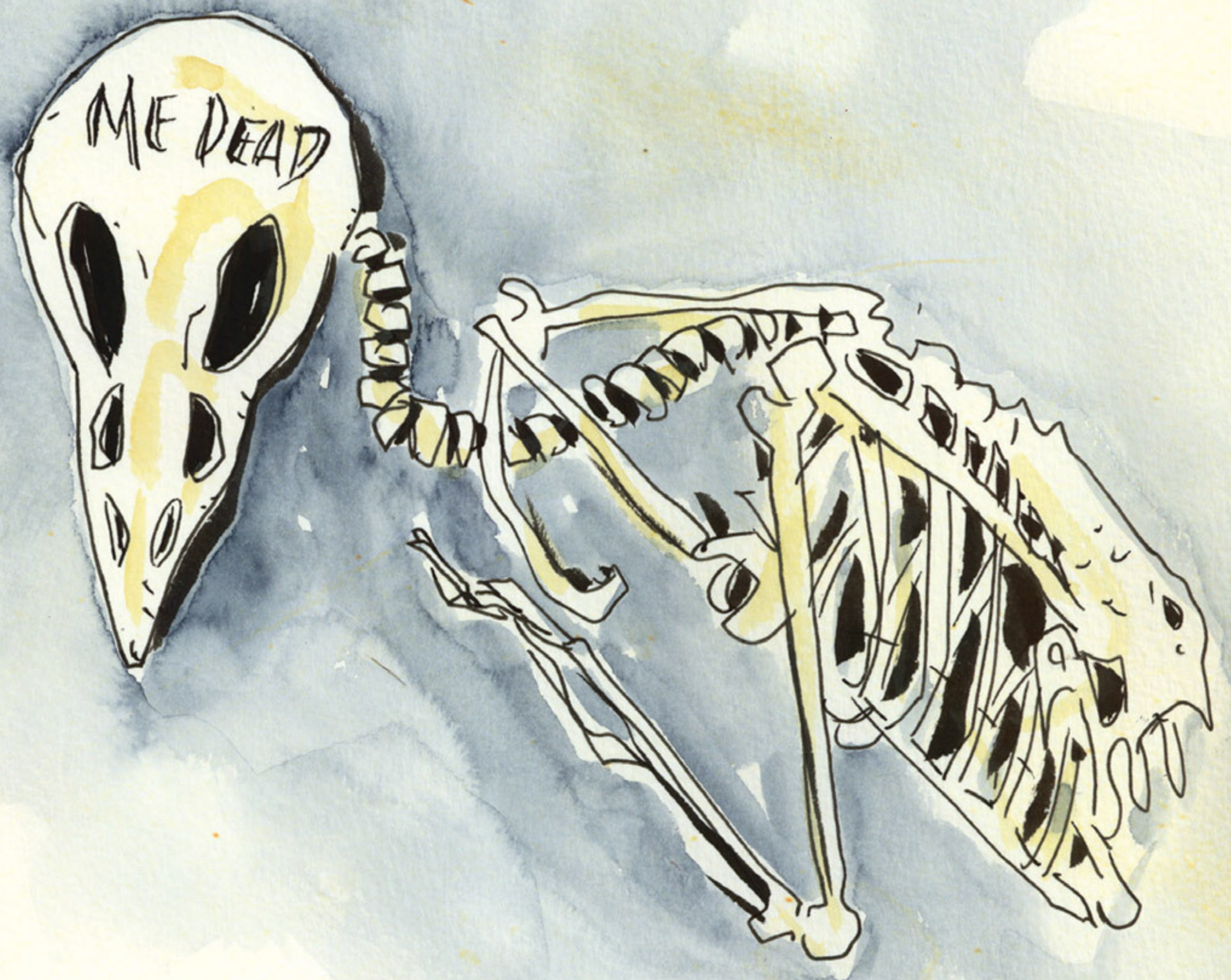
Its prize exhibit was a dinosaur skeleton belonging to a species that was assumed to be one of the first to have feathers. The skeleton was small, about the size of a chicken. A plaque overhead showed what the dinosaur may have looked like in life, which was ridiculous, with feathers protruding like long, colored paddles from its head and janky arms. The feathers had only been decorative, not functional, and, in a sad twist of fate, likely led to the creature's demise, having made it slower, more visible, and easier to hunt. Someone had carved the words "me dead" on the thing's skull with a pocketknife.

There were times, wandering around the museum or scoping out Heartwell, that I questioned what I was doing. Questioned whether I should just get out now. But then I'd think of Claire, of Nathan, of my mother, and I'd resign myself to another day of planning.

And then, one morning, out of nowhere, I saw how to do it.

I saw a way that would bring everything full circle.

The perfect answer. Right there in front of my eyes.



Four years later, almost to the day, I am on my way to visit the clinic for the first time.

It's in the Andes, not far from the Aconcagua peak.

To get there, I fly into a small airport outside Mendoza, Argentina, and then take a van to the base of the adjacent mountains. At the foot of the range sit three turbine helicopters. When my van arrives, one already has its rotors spinning, blasting wild orbits of wind through the tall grass.

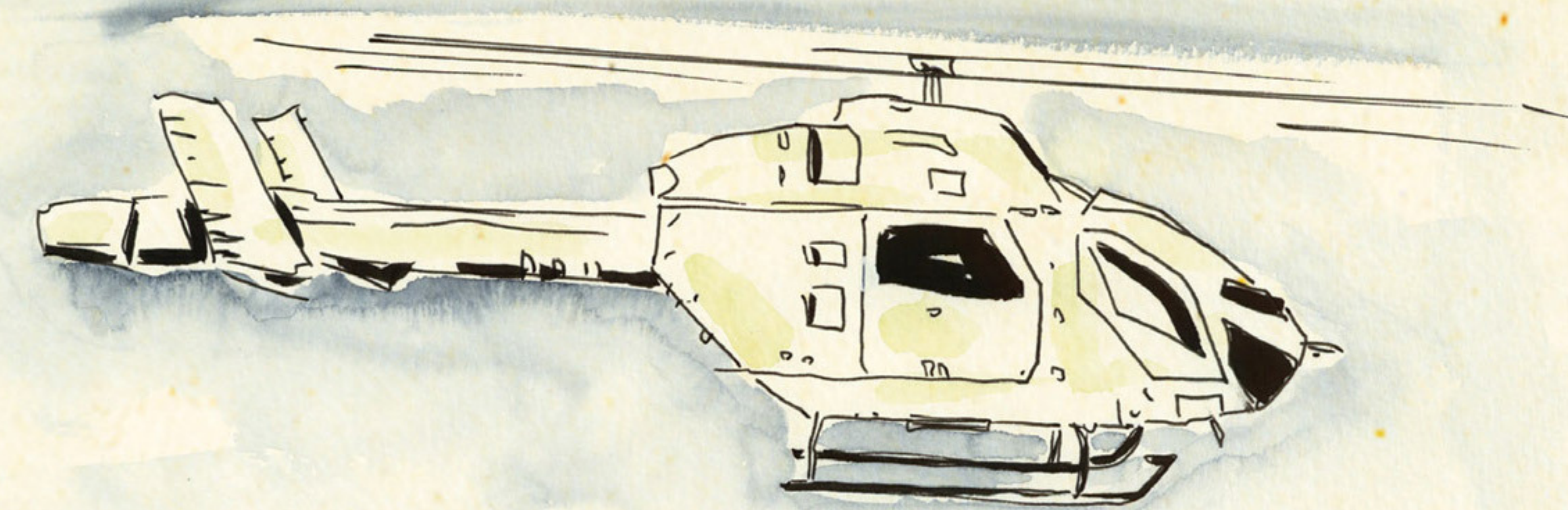
The driver of the van ushers me over, and I get inside, and there, waiting in the passenger area, are two other people.

A man and a woman.

The man is a little older than me, thin, dark-skinned, dressed smartly in tweeds and a bowtie. He has a baseball cap on, made of a fabric I can tell is expensive, with a series of small, metallic stars embroidered across the side. He smiles warmly at me--he has one of those naturally handsome smiles--and raises his hand, hello, and I do the same. As I get in, the pilot reaches back and hands me a headset.

I sit beside the man in the bowtie and across from the other passenger, a woman who looks to be in her mid-thirties. She's wearing a heavy knit shawl with a maze-like pattern that makes me think of ancient pottery, and as I sit she smiles too, albeit thinly, mouth closed. Her face is strong, almost masculine in the set of the brow, the cheekbones, the prominent, slightly witchy chin. I figure her for Greek; her hair is that pure black that looks almost blue in sunlight and she wears it pulled back, but a few rings have fallen around her eyes, which are dark and serious and full of worry.

I immediately wonder how out of place I seem to these two people with my flannel, my jeans, my gym bag rather than a nice duffel or carry-on. The hobo on their helicopter to immortality. But before I can think too much about this, the helicopter takes off.



The sudden jolt upward makes the three of us tense and grip our seats. When the shock passes, we all laugh a bit, embarrassed, a little scared. The man in the bow tie fans his heart with his hat.

"And so it begins," he says, the headset bringing his voice so close, right inside my ear. His accent is British mixed with something I can't place.

He flashes that smile again as he puts on sunglasses with the same three-star pattern as his cap.

The helicopter is rising at a startling rate, like an express elevator, and the feeling is disconcerting, like being both weightless and heavy, like there's nothing in you, but you're sinking deeper and deeper into your seat.



The woman is gripping the leather loop above her chair.

"You okay?" I say.

She nods quickly, trying to smile, but just then the helicopter lurches, and she closes her eyes.

The man in the bowtie leans forward and says something in Spanish to the pilot, and the pilot replies.

Then the man in the bow tie turns to us. "He says it's just a little bit more rough air." He makes a small space with his thumb and index finger, then closes the space. Poof, gone.

"So have you been up to it yet?" says the man in the bow tie.

"Been where?" I say.

"To the retreat, of course," he says.

I have not heard it called a retreat before. Errant has always described it as a clinic.

I tell him no.

The woman says no too, still clutching the leather loop.

"I visited last year, before the water was settled," he says. "It was already a sight. Got a batch of it too."



A BATCH?

The woman and I both look at him.

"A batch of what, the cure?" I say.

He nods. "Just the primer, but I already feel it, I tell you. You know how old I am? Guess how bloody old."

The woman and I look at each other-- she is smiling at the idea of this game, though her face is bloodless --then we study the man in the bowtie.

He poses for us, mugging, hands on his hips.

Then, abruptly, he waves us off and says, "Ah, you know what, don't guess. I'll tell you when we get up there. I'll surprise you."

"How does it feel?" I ask.

"The cure?" he says.

He thinks about this a moment, and then he opens a compartment in the door of the helicopter--a compartment I hadn't even realized was there--and he takes out a small pink bottle of champagne.

"Like this," he says, holding up the bottle, "in every cell."

He pops the cork, and the woman screams and we all laugh.

We rise further, and the air evens out. We ascend past sweeps of meadow, and then past thick forests of cypress and spruce, and then the plant life starts to give way.

Above, I can see clouds clinging to the peaks.

The woman pulls her bag on her lap and opens it and rummages around inside for something. She catches me looking and says, "Can't find my gum." Her voice is even closer inside my ear, much closer than the man in the bow tie's sounded--a weird sensation.

I hand her some from my pocket.

"Huh. This is the kind I buy," she says, amused.

"I stole it from your bag."

She rolls her eyes, smiling. "Ah. So what did you do back on Earth?"

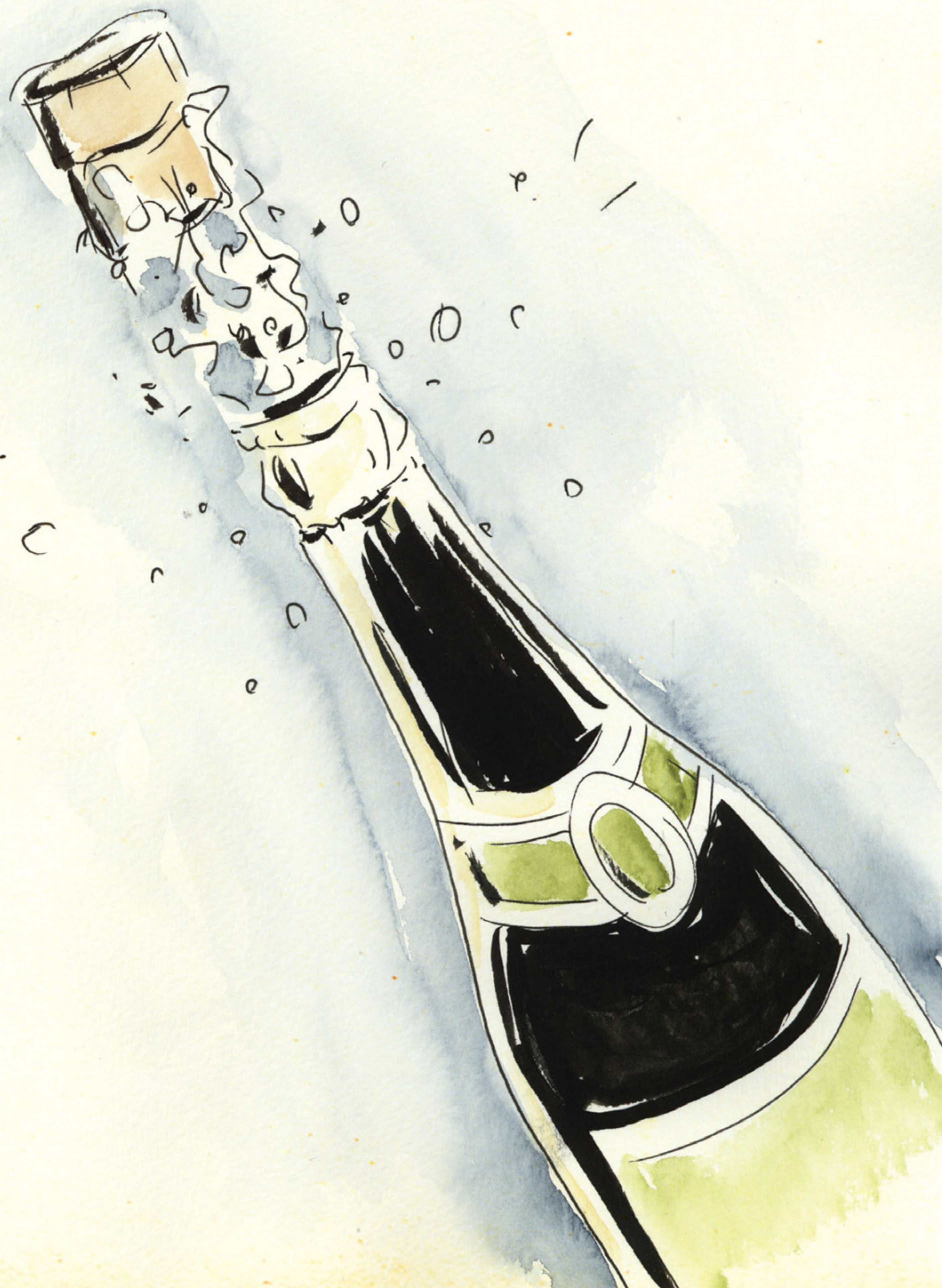
"I'm a thief."

"Stop," she says, but her face has become girlish, playful.

"I am," I say. "I didn't steal your gum, but I am."

And I realize just then that I have not ever put it that way before. I told Bud Hunter I stole, sure. Maybe a couple other people, but I'd never qualified myself as a thief, out and out, but here, in this helicopter, it feels right.

She appears to see the truth in this, and just nods and says, "Okay then," seeming to like the absurdity of it. The man in the bow tie has taken off his headset and is talking to the pilot, leaning up between the seats so it's just me and the woman talking through the radio.



"How about you?" I say, as we ascend past a goat with one horn standing on a narrow rock ledge. I can see no viable way to or from the ledge at all. The goat seems to have just appeared there.

The woman tells me she works for Sigil down in Atlanta. She runs a division of their recording studios that spans the Southeast, leasing them out for nonprofit groups.

She asks me how I became a thief, if I really am one, and I tell her I just fell into it, really, and ask her how she became someone who leases recording space?

She laughs. "I fell into it too. My father worked for Sigil before me, and I followed him in, I suppose."

I ask if he's coming to the retreat too, her father.

She tenses a little. "No," she says. "No, he died not long ago."

"I'm sorry," I say, as we pass sharp outcroppings of rock.

"That's all right," she says. "He was visiting Corsica and got caught in a mudslide, if you can believe that." She glances out the window at the rock face scrolling by. By now, there are no plants left, only layer upon layer of timeless black stone, every cubic inch older than the entire human race. "He came to America from Greece alone, no family, no English. He worked for a church, studied elevator repair, and found a job at the Sigil building, married my mother, had me...I'm going on and on. I'm sorry."

"It's okay," I say.

"Thank you. Anyway, in all that time, he'd never gone back home. So finally, last year, he went to visit Corsica, and he was hiking, and there was a flash flood, and he was buried alive."

"Jesus."

"I know. And they never found him," she says, still looking out the window. "They don't know if he was swept out to sea or is still there under the mud. He just vanished."

The man in the bow tie laughs at something the pilot has said to him and pats the pilot's shoulder.

"Want to know the most ridiculous part?" the woman says. "He's missing for weeks, presumed dead, and my mother is dying from it, I'm a mess. And what comes in the mail but this stupid thing."

From the bag on her lap she pulls a floor mat.



She picks a piece of lint from the fibers.

"His name was Matygus," she says, tossing the lint to the floor. "We were always embarrassed by it growing up, me and my mother. We wanted him to go by Mat. I suppose he sent this home as a joke. He must have mailed it just before he was killed."

I tell her I'm sorry again, and then there's nothing to say for a moment.

The helicopter's turbines are louder, the air thinning out.

The woman tells me her name, Inez, and then turns the talk back to me.

"So why you, why the cure?" she says.

I look down at my hands, as if there'll be an answer there. "I suppose because I'm just... tired of being afraid all the time. Tired of feeling like my life is an egg I'm balancing on a spoon day after day. Because I just live in fear, and this..." and here I look up at her, "this just isn't who I want to be."

She stares at me a moment. "Well, look at that," she says. "I guess you you are a thief. You stole my answer."

"I don't like the forgetting aspect of it, though," she says, abruptly. "That worries me. I don't want to forget. It's ghoulish. That's why I brought the mat, why I brought so much stuff. Too much."

"You hold nearly a hundred years," I say.

"I know, I know. But still, I don't like it. I don't want to forget myself, even the ugly stuff. I know some people are doing this to escape, to start over altogether, but I just want a little relief from the panic, you know? So I can live braver. Be me, but, I don't know...better."

I hold up a pen.

"Ha! Right? I bought new journals, and we're like ninety years away from it," she says.

The helicopter lurches a bit, and I make a joke about wanting to forget that last bump, and she laughs.

"You know," she says, "I'm glad I met you. I'm glad we're riding together."

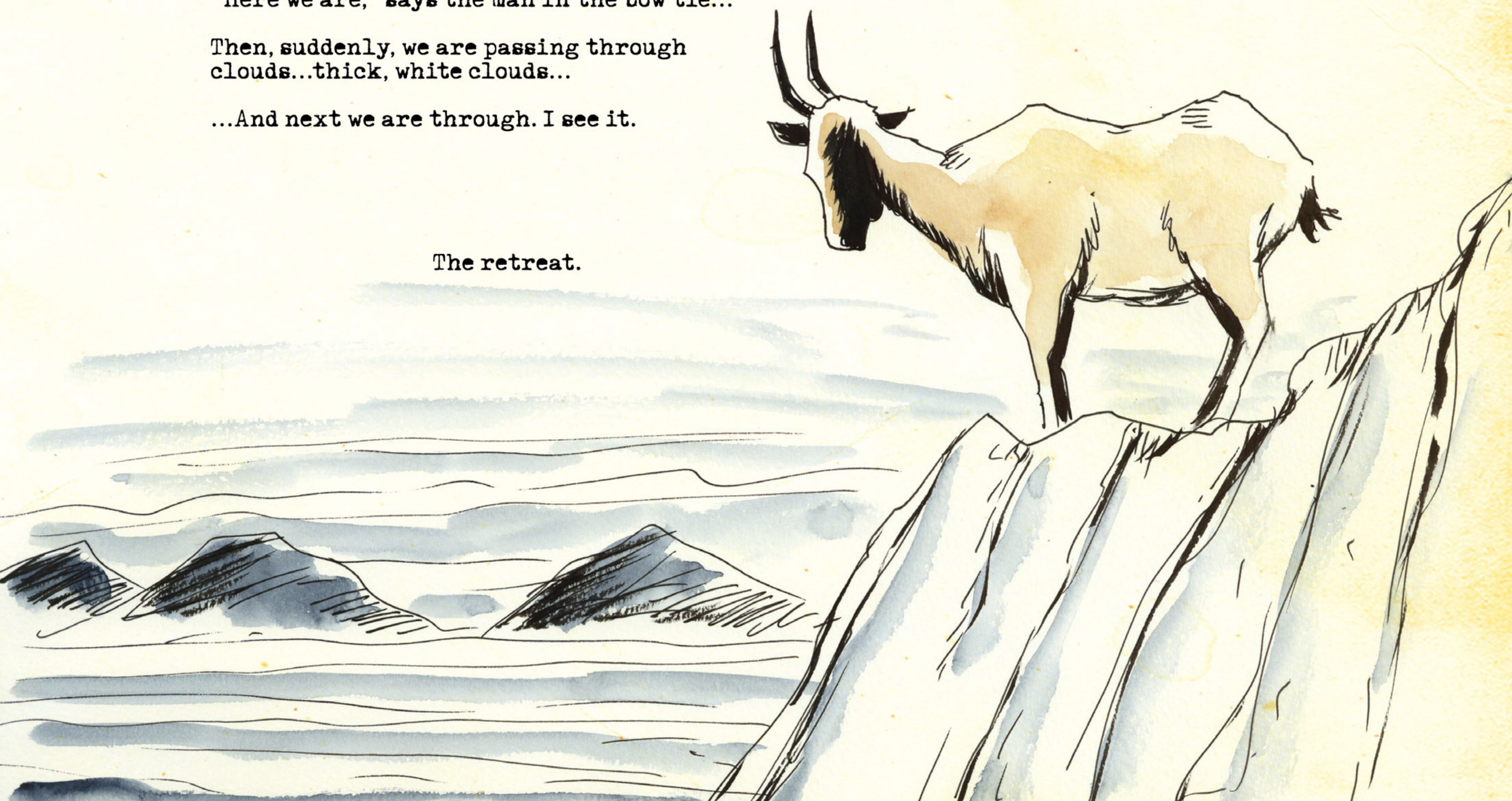
"Me too," I say, and it occurs to me then how much I like her, how attracted to her I am. I want to take this cure and be free of my fear and go with her down the mountain and start over. I want to engage and be tied to things, part of things with her. Just take the cure once, roll back the clock a little, not forever, just a bit, and barrel into it all head first with Inez. Hell, maybe we don't even need the cure, I think, maybe we just go for it.

"Here we are," says the man in the bow tie...

Then, suddenly, we are passing through clouds...thick, white clouds...

...And next we are through. I see it.

The retreat.



Immediately, what strikes me about the place is the ambition of it. I pictured a small hospital, a laboratory, something utilitarian, but instead it looks like a whole town. It's situated on a lake, and all around are strips of greenery, thin bands of grass being rolled out.

"See, the water is finally settled," says the man in the bowtie, pointing to the lake, to a series of pipes running from it straight into the dirt.

"They're getting heat coils up the back for the mountain peaks, solar thermal," he says.

I look at the far end of the retreat, and I can see there are small roads leading down the mountain on that side. Construction vehicles under tarps, behind low, corrugated warehouses.

It occurs to me that the place isn't being set up as a temporary site while any final tests are run, or a preliminary retreat. The cure, as it stands now, takes a month to administer, and will need to be readministered every few years, at least, to remain vibrant, so it makes sense that the retreat would have lodging, but what is being built here looks more expansive and more permanent than anything I'd expected.

"How many people are up here now?" asks the woman; apparently we are thinking similar thoughts.

"Around five hundred," says the man in the bow tie. "About two hundred that stay year-round."

Year-round. I see Inez recoil at the thought. She turns and catches me looking at her, but I don't look away. I look into her eyes, straight on, wanting her to see in mine the same conviction I know she feels.

"You'll go back down," I say, apropos of nothing. The words seem to affect her; her shoulders relax a little, her grip. It's what she needed to hear, and I mean it with everything inside me.

We will teach each other to be better. We will go down, no matter how bad things have gotten.

Admittedly, in the four years since my Heartwell theft, Errant's prognosis of events has felt more prescient. Nothing horrific has happened, no massive attacks, no total breakdown; it's the little things...the ways in which people seem to be pulling away from each other, into stories of their own making. A cyber-bug in a certain kind of pipe elbow causes a nationwide water shortage for a month. A nuclear plant in China overheats, and the event is thought to be retaliatory. You can almost feel it, the low scrape of seats backing away from the table by an inch here, an inch there. Like Errant had said...the paranoia and protectionism of old age. And the simple failures of age too. Services breaking down. Money printed wrong. A bank losing funds digitally, then regaining them twenty-four hours later. No military state, no civil war in the streets. Just the erosion of any kind of certainty. Everyone unsure. Making up his own explanations.

Modern Home cut back business, did only custom homes now.

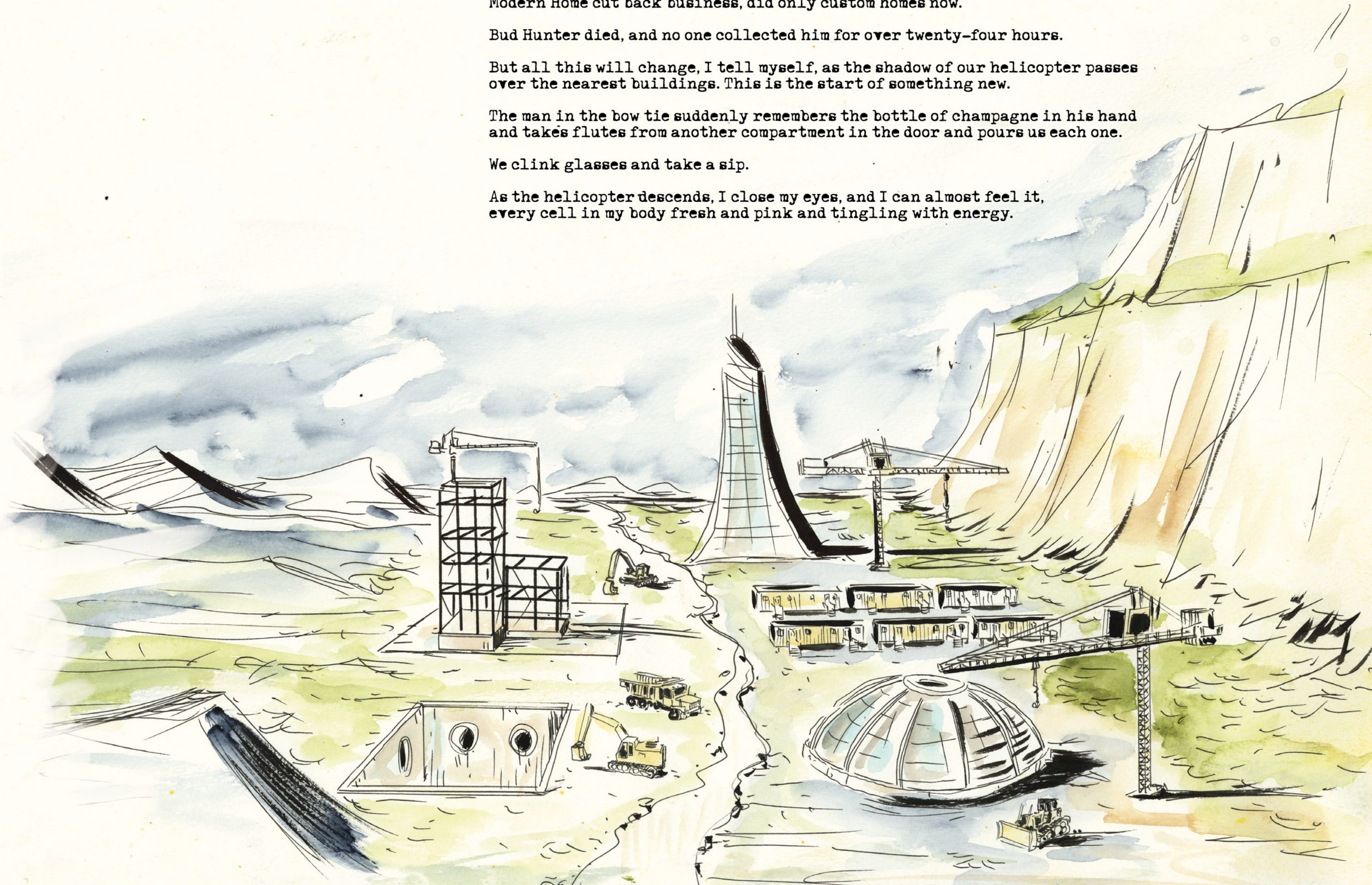
Bud Hunter died, and no one collected him for over twenty-four hours.

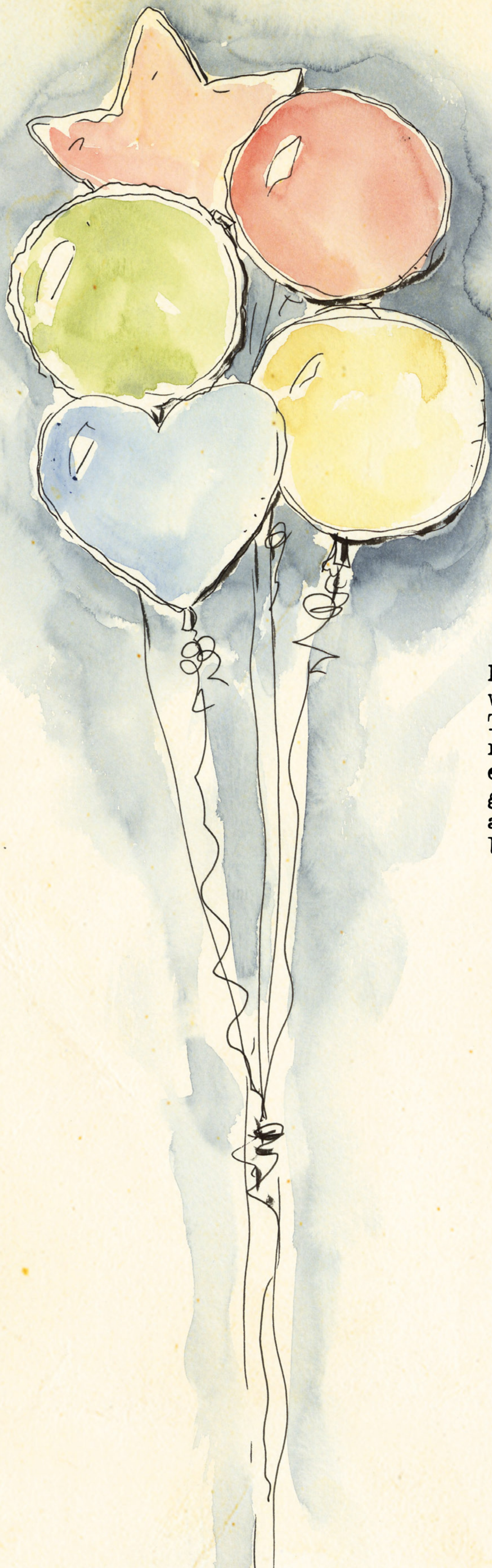
But all this will change, I tell myself, as the shadow of our helicopter passes over the nearest buildings. This is the start of something new.

The man in the bow tie suddenly remembers the bottle of champagne in his hand and takes flutes from another compartment in the door and pours us each one.

We clink glasses and take a sip.

As the helicopter descends, I close my eyes, and I can almost feel it, every cell in my body fresh and pink and tingling with energy.





How I stole Claire
was the balloons.
The balloons the
nurse brought in
every Monday and
gave to the children
at night before
bed.

During the afternoons, he tied them up at the nurse's station. They hung there, right below a central fire alarm, for hours. The man he bought the balloons from sold them from a grocer's just down the road. The grocer kept the helium tanks he used to fill the balloons beneath a souvenir and kitsch counter just outside the store. A roadside kiosk. The tanks were locked at night, but only by a small bicycle padlock. And the tanks were standard in every way, aluminum, three feet tall--the same size as hydrogen tanks used for car fuel cells, among other things. But hydrogen is flammable, all the way down to a 75% mixture with helium. You switch out helium for hydrogen, the balloons get filled, the latex thins...the balloon ignites. Nothing dangerous, but a flash of light and heat, enough to set off a fire alarm, easy.

When I took Claire from the room, she was asleep. I put her in the van and covered her with blankets to keep her warm.

For a brief moment, she opened her eyes and cried out...

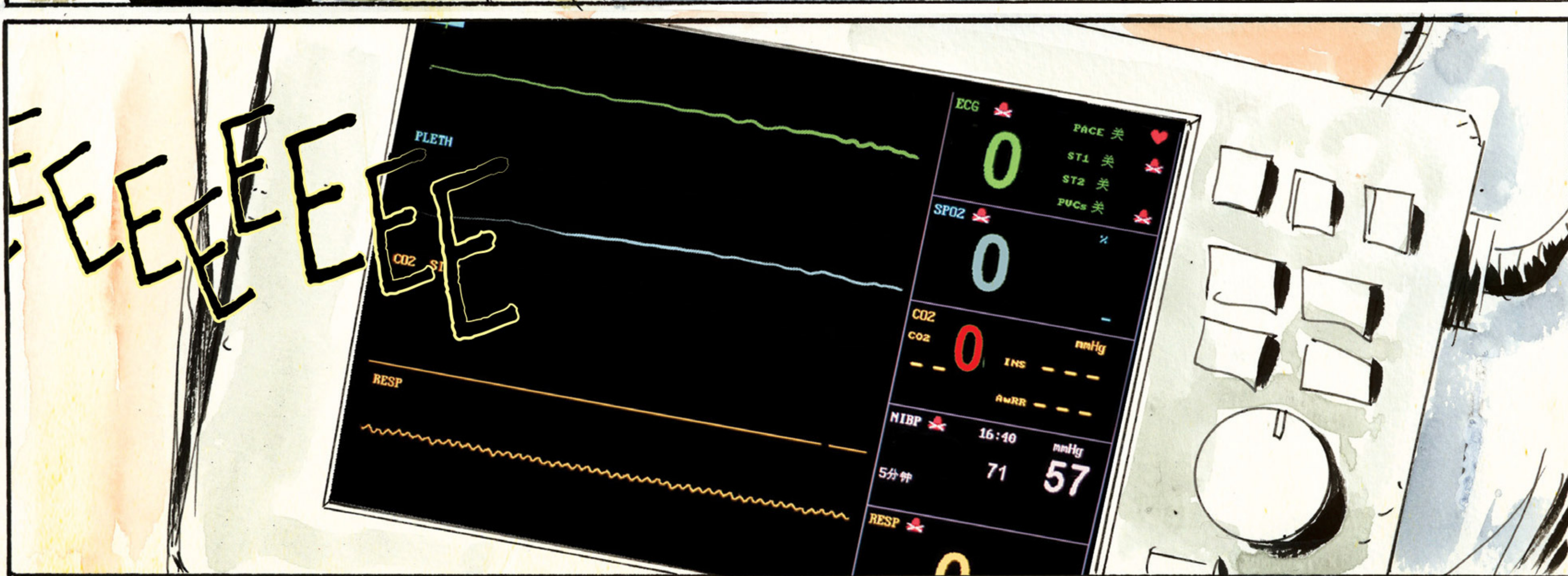
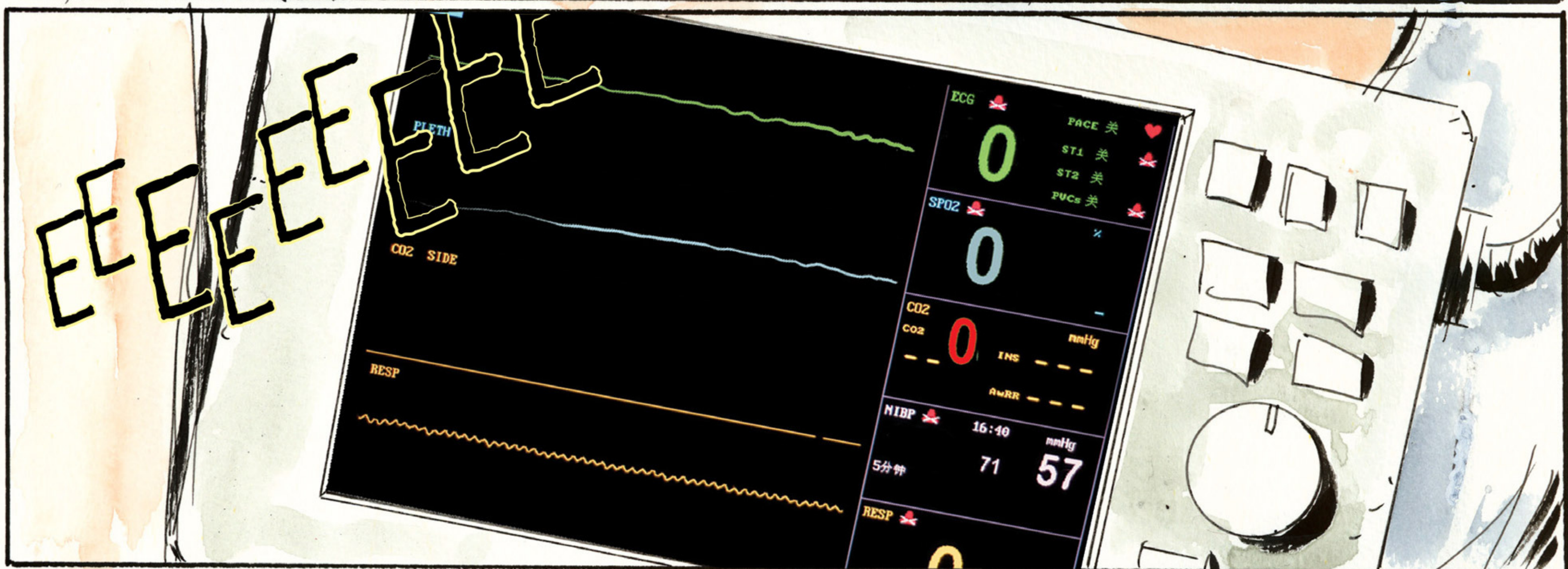
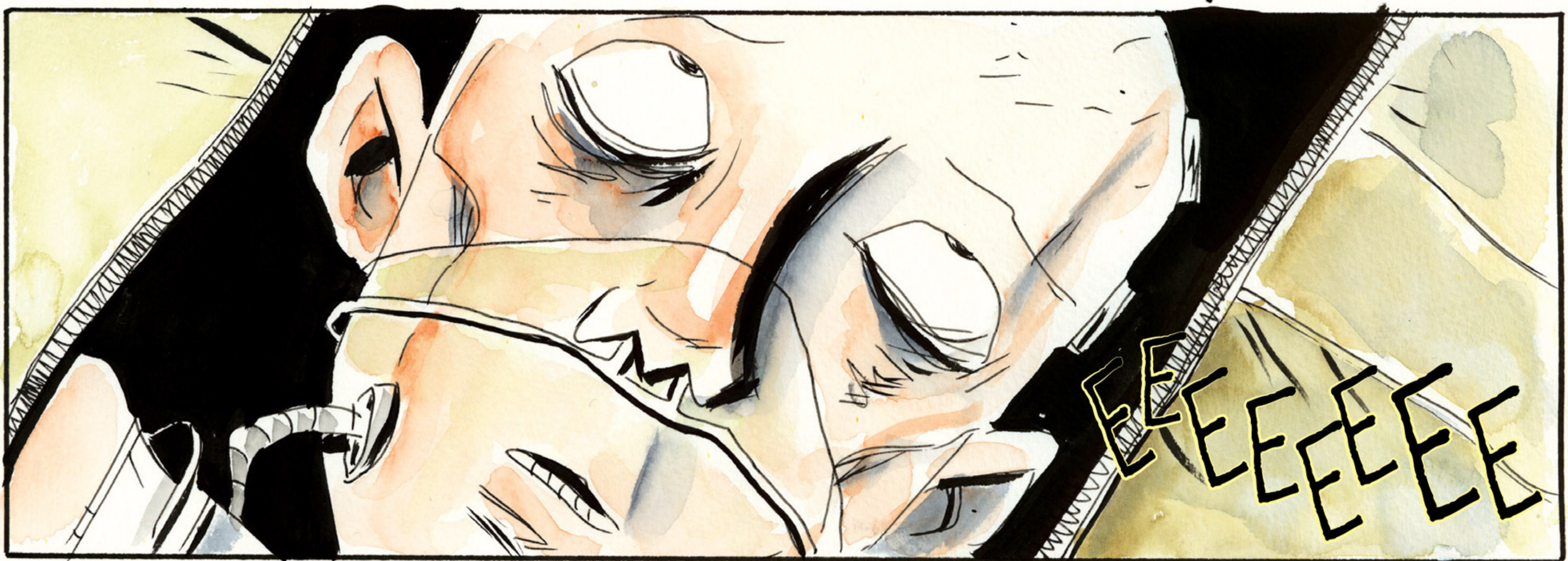
... a terrible shriek...

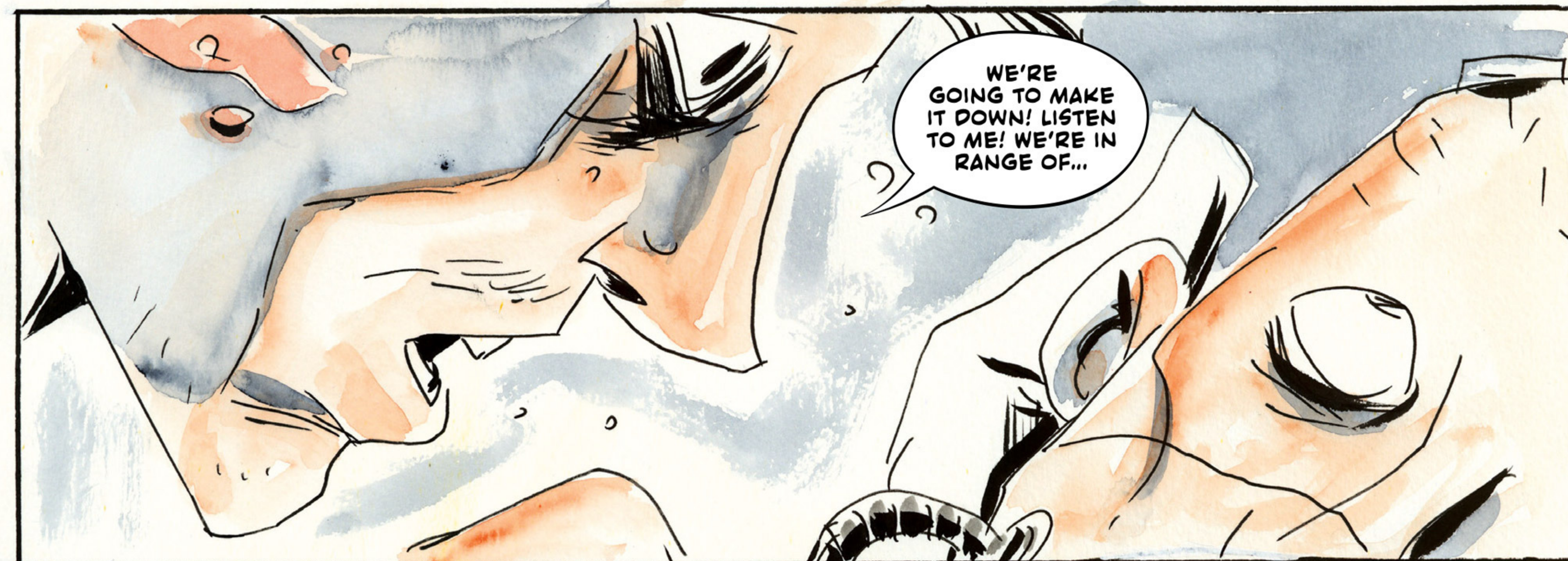
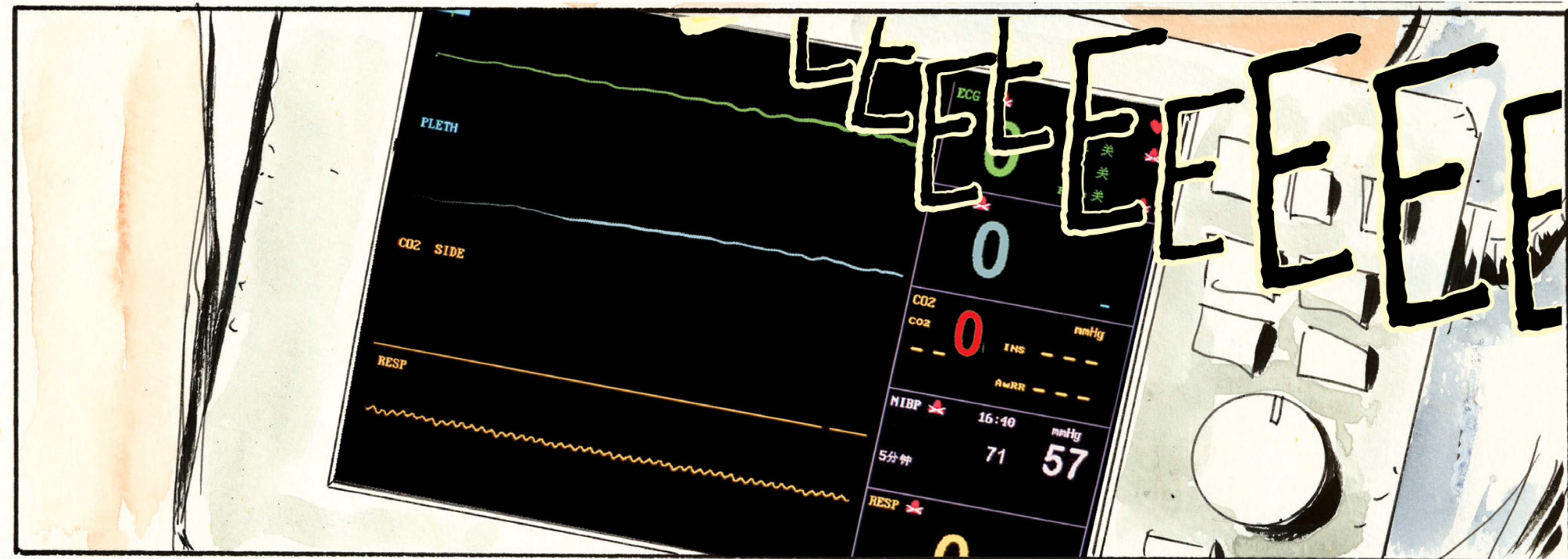
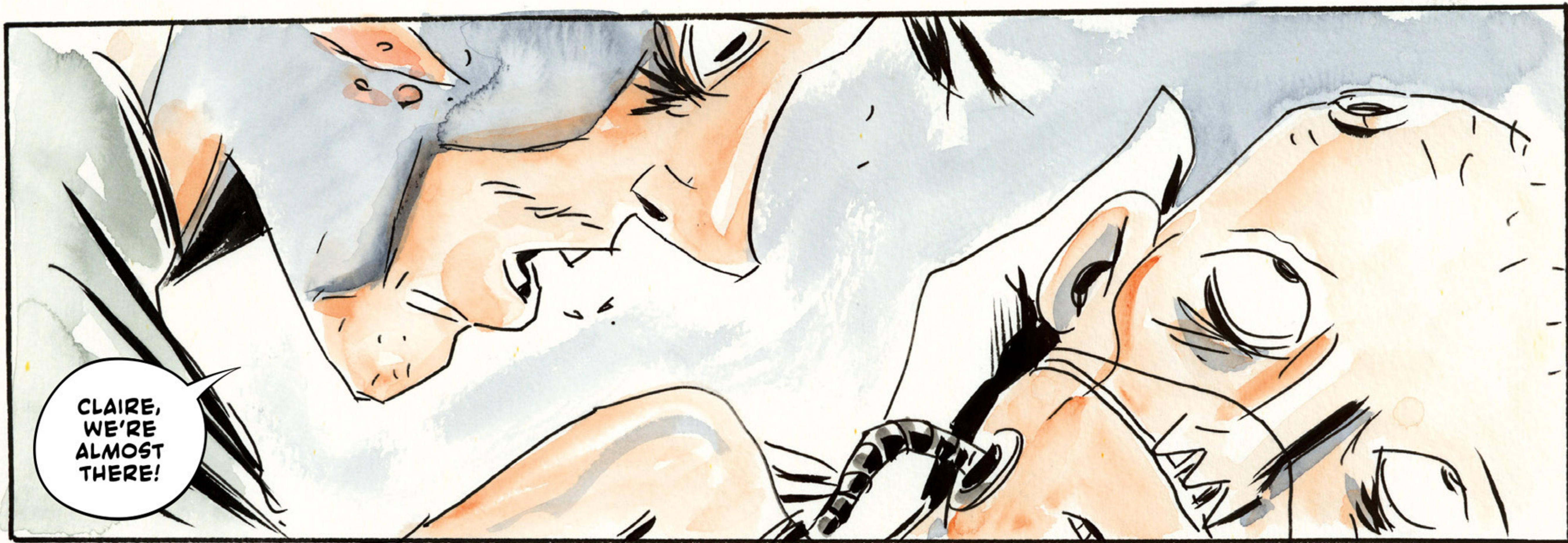
...but I couldn't tell if it was for shock, or joy, or nothing at all.

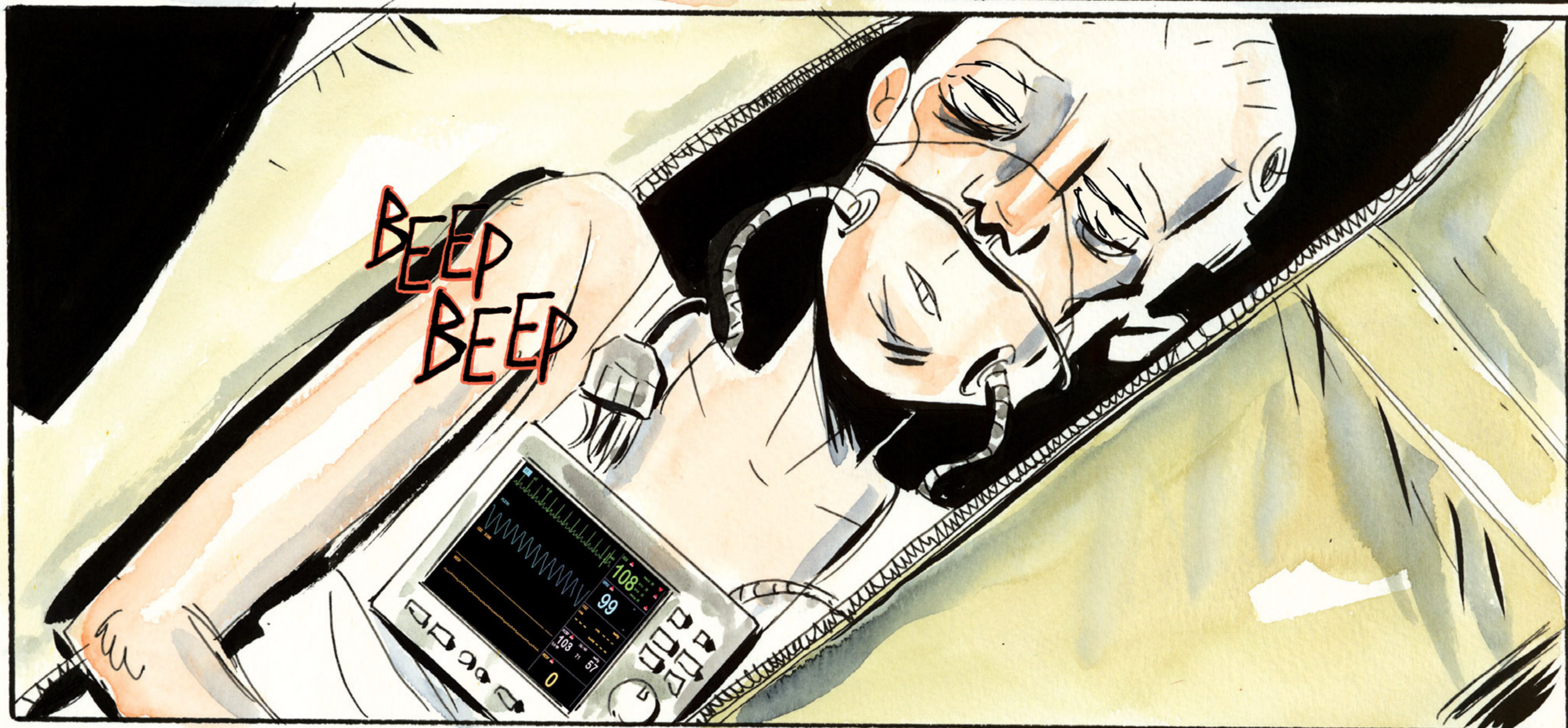
As we drove, I thought about my first memory. How it had, in fact, spoken to the last moments of my life.

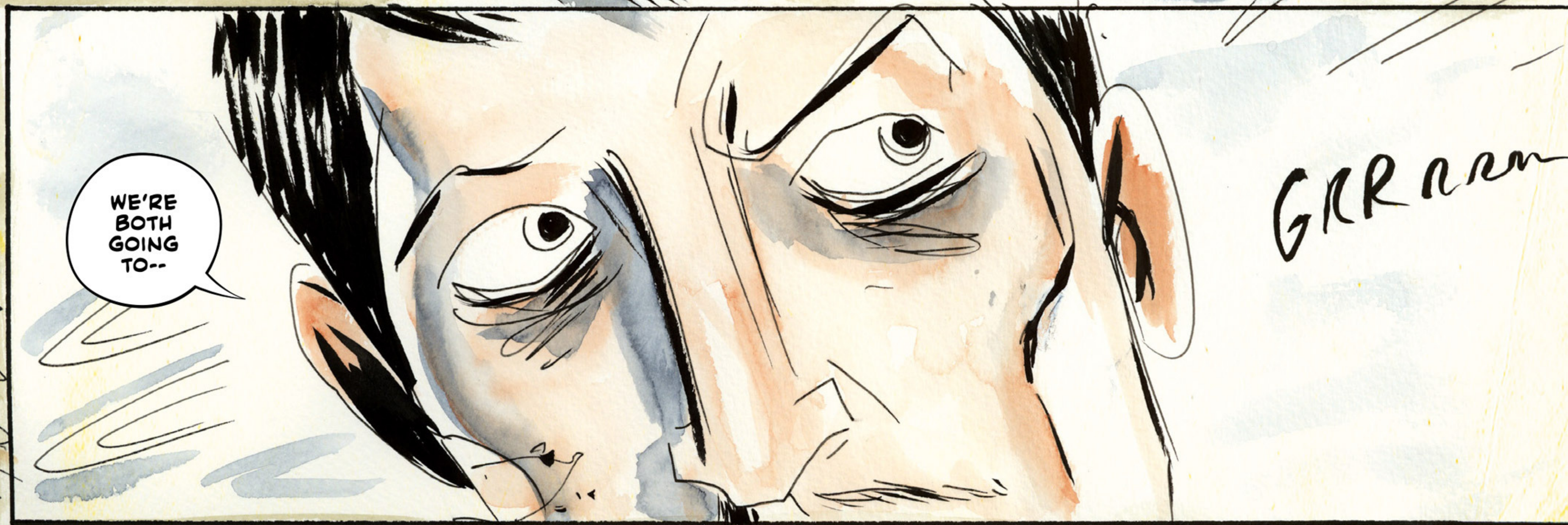
The balloon with the light in it, blinking in my father's fist above my dying mother.

The balloon from a faraway place that would give us the great prize we'd all been waiting for.



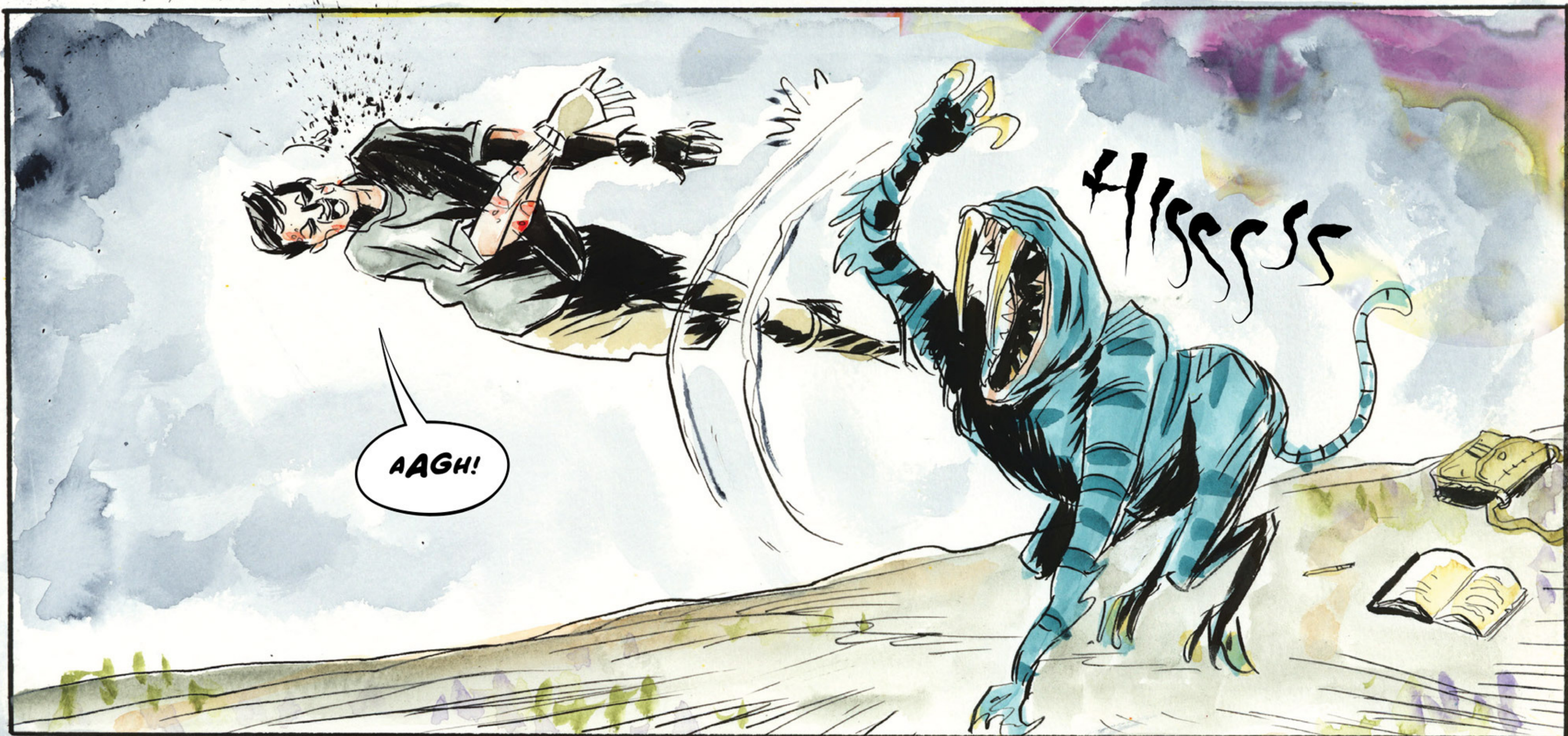


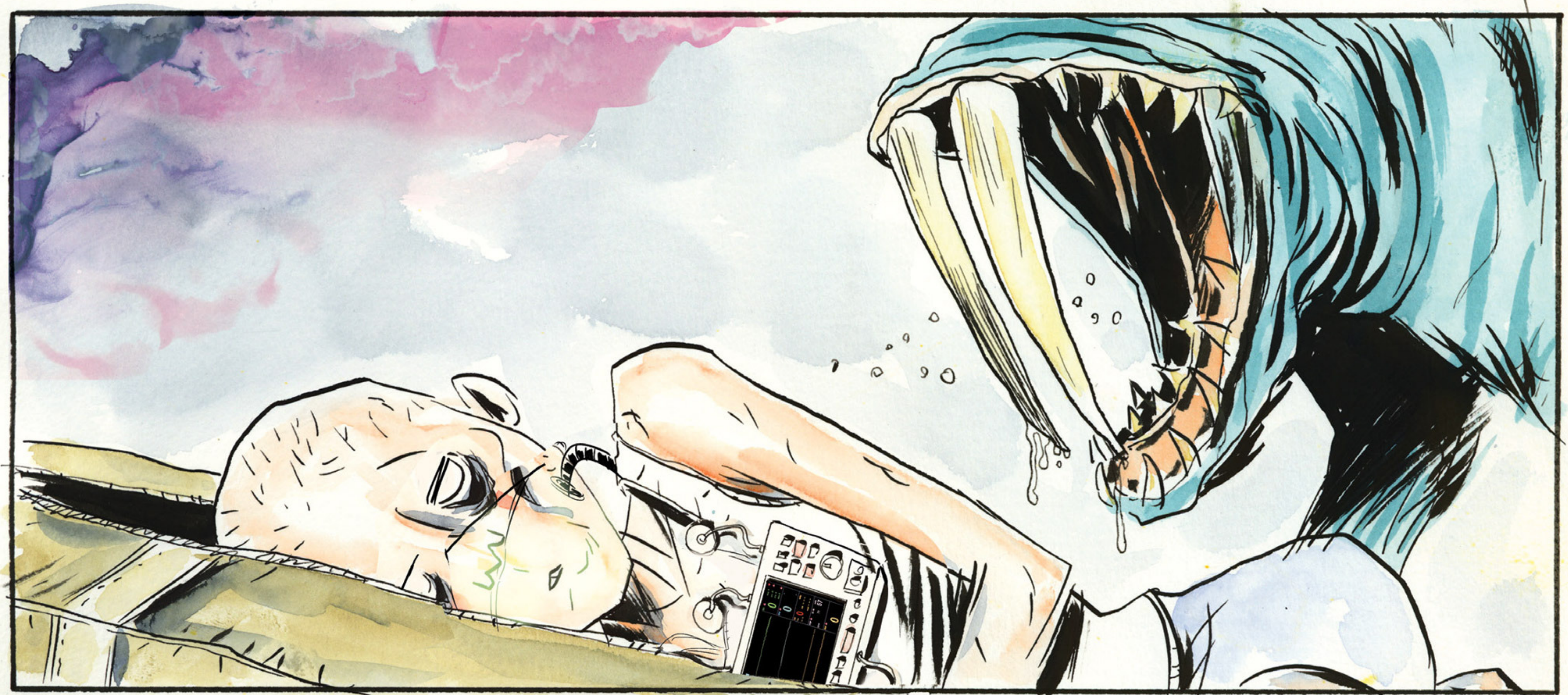


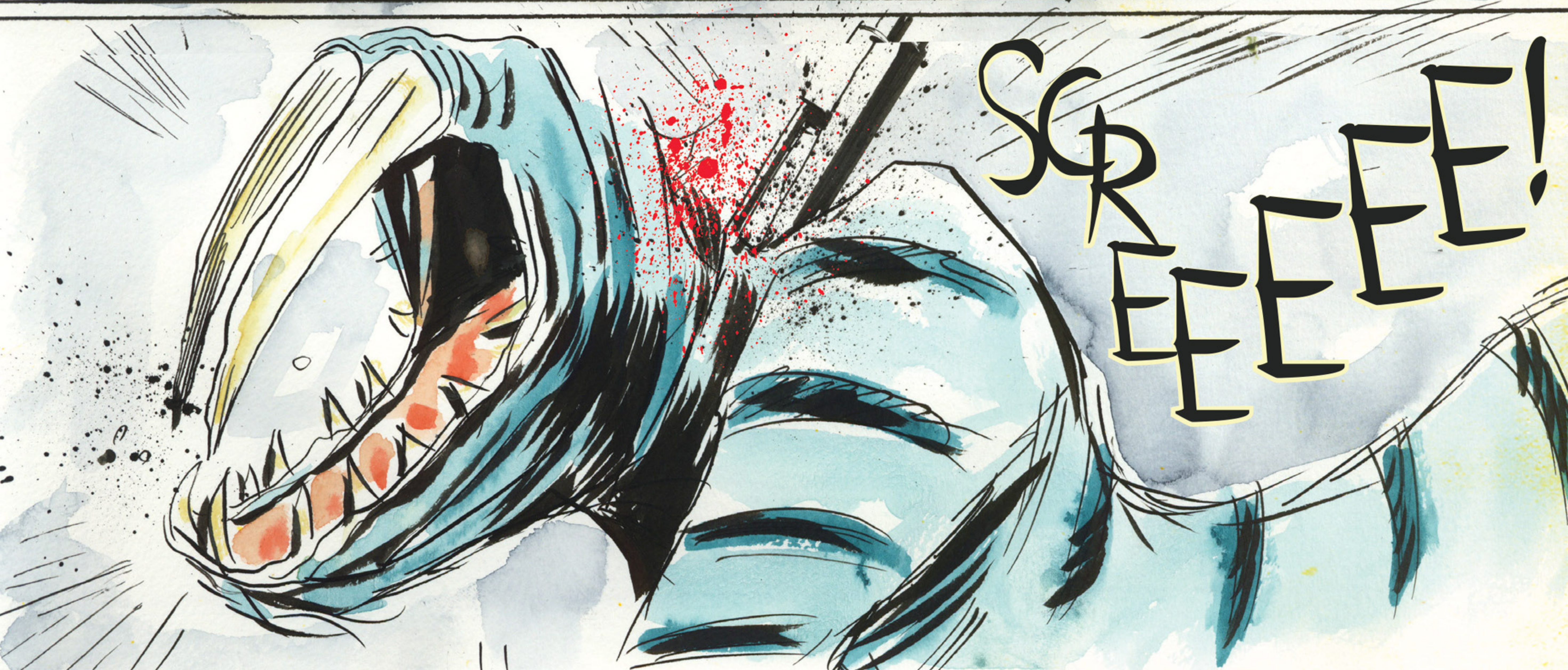




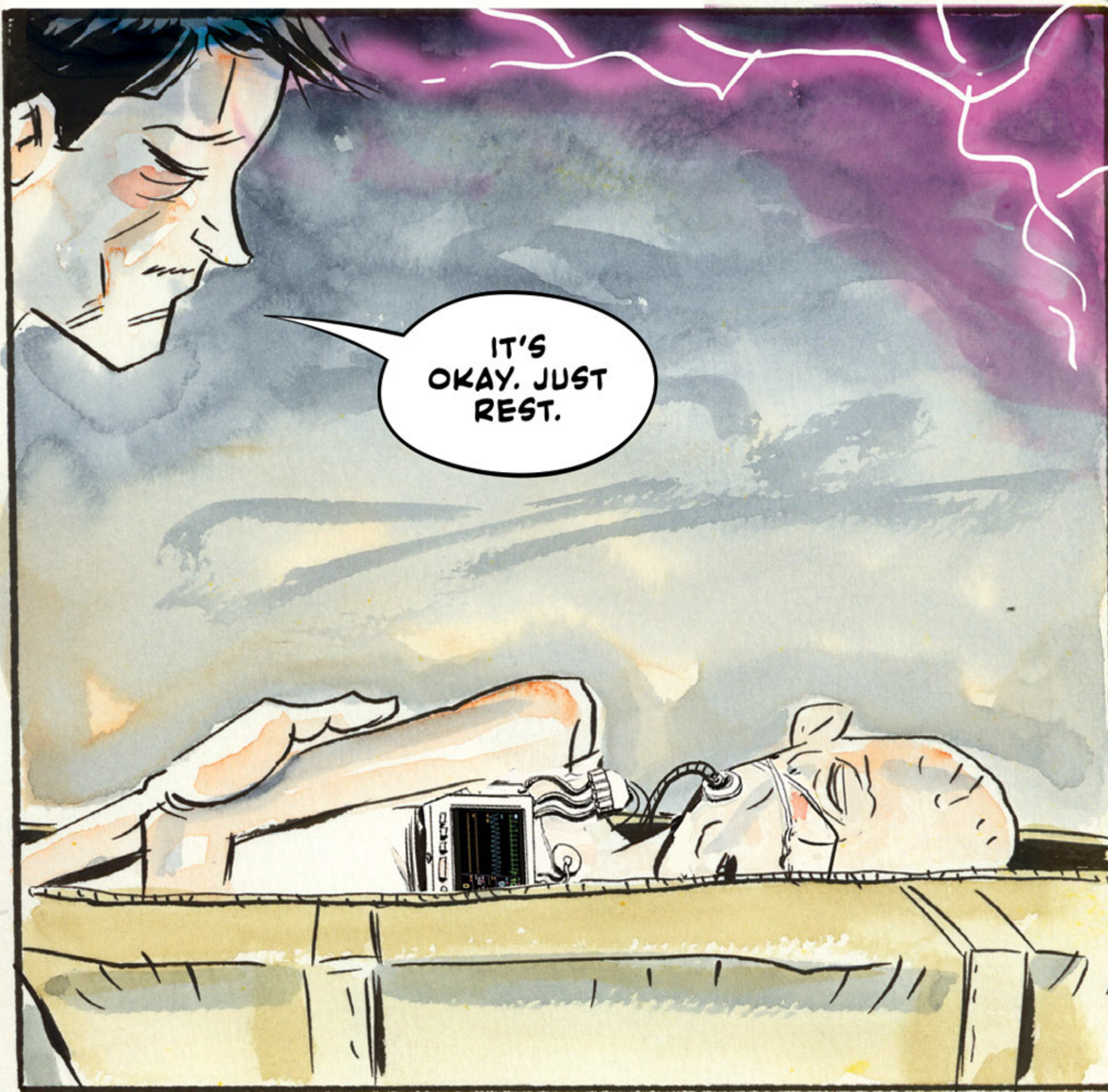
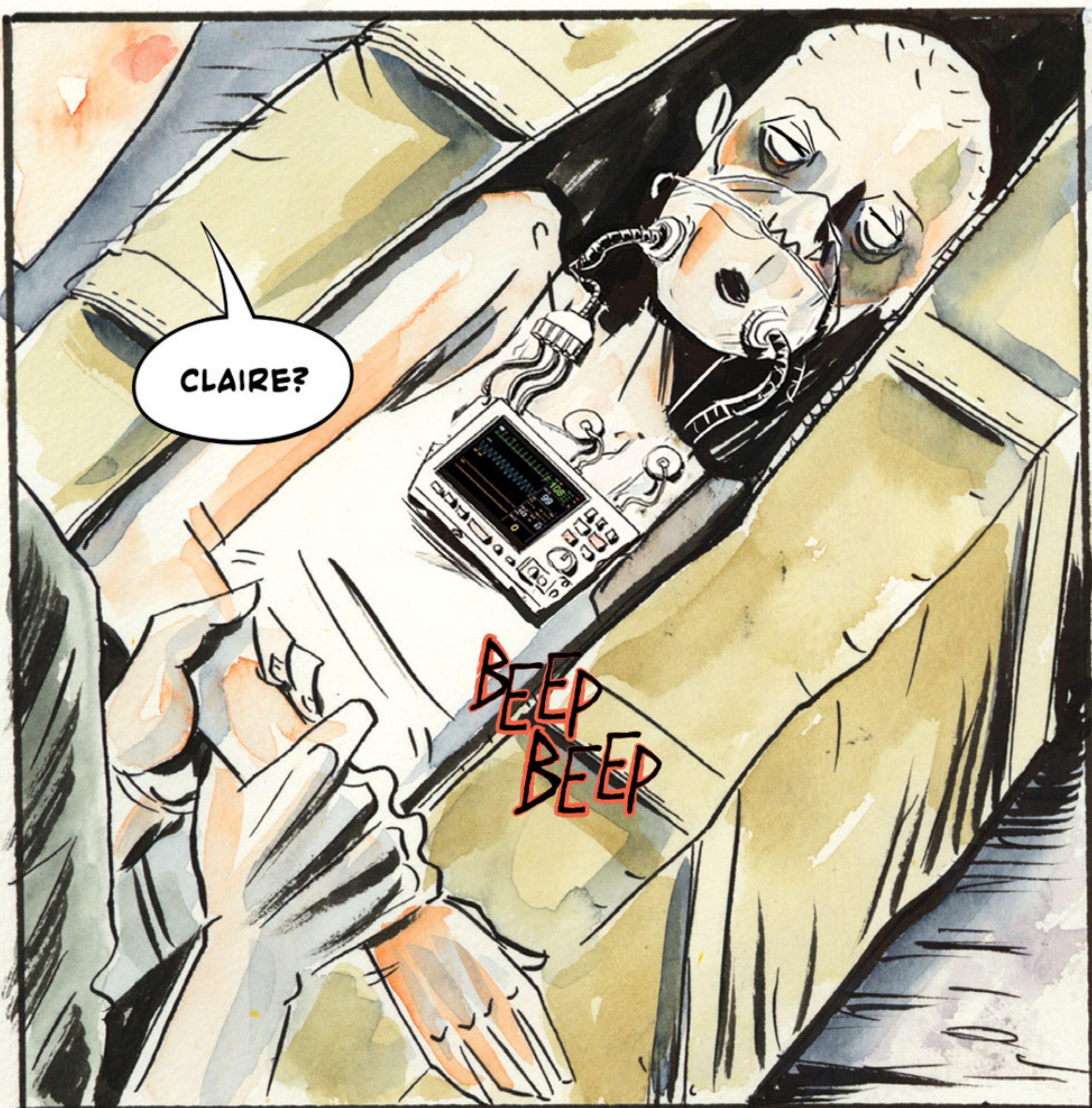
GRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRR













"I will make it down
this mountain.



"I will see what's left
of the world below.



"I will
go there.



"I will put back
all I stole.

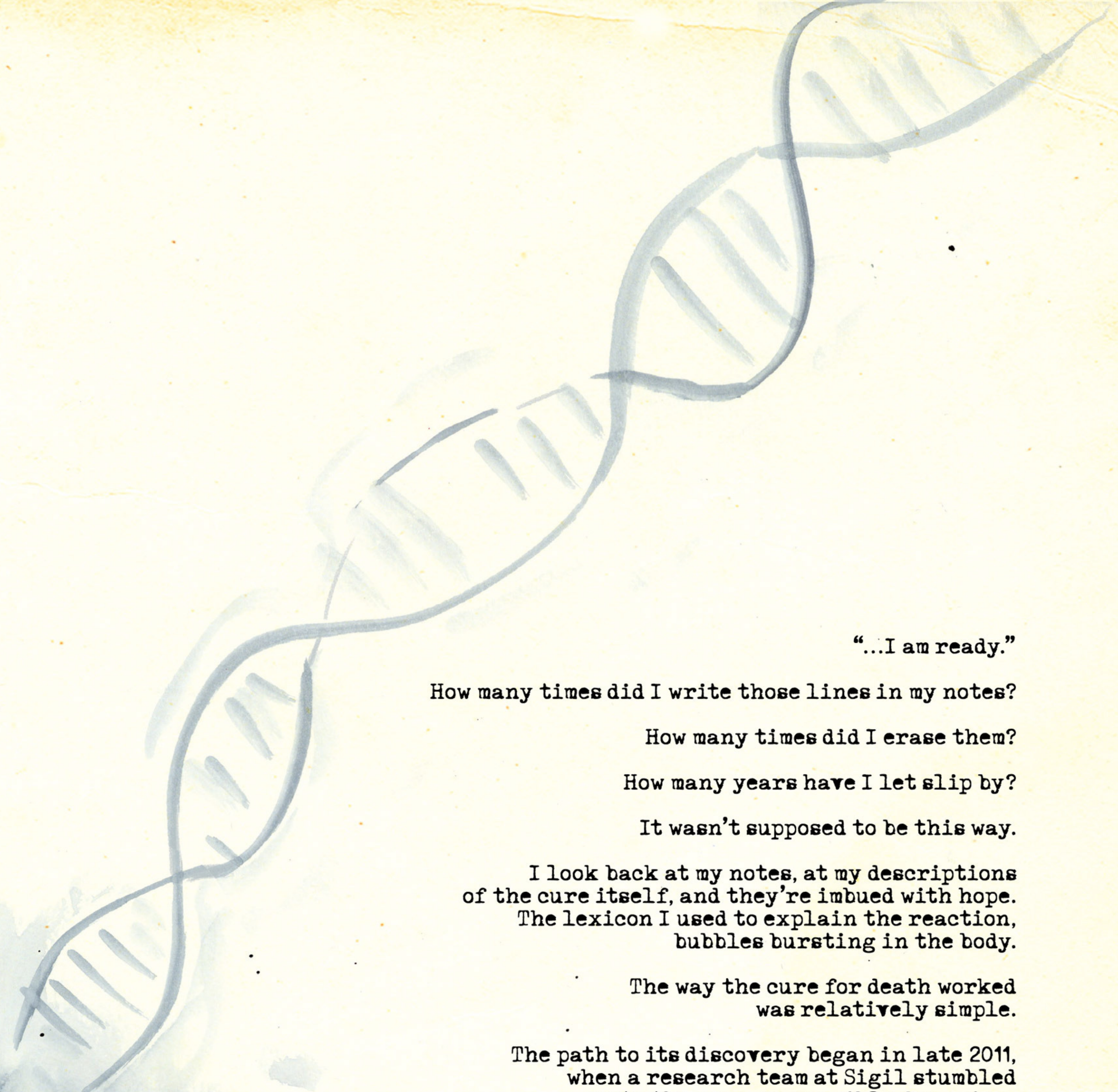


"Whatever lies
ahead..."

"...Whatever is
down there..."

"...I will do this
one thing."

"...I am
ready."



“...I am ready.”

How many times did I write those lines in my notes?

How many times did I erase them?

How many years have I let slip by?

It wasn't supposed to be this way.

I look back at my notes, at my descriptions
of the cure itself, and they're imbued with hope.
The lexicon I used to explain the reaction,
bubbles bursting in the body.

The way the cure for death worked
was relatively simple.

The path to its discovery began in late 2011,
when a research team at Sigil stumbled
onto the gene responsible for aging.

They hadn't been looking for it at first.

They were working on cataloguing CREB and
zif268 genes at the time--genes linked to memory
and retention. Along the way, though, a new gene
caught their attention, one of the peripheral genes
caught up in the cluster they'd been studying.

What the team noticed was that, when one particular
gene was damaged in young mice, the mice began to age
prematurely; injury to the gene basically caused the
mice to go into a kind of immediate and rapid old age.

The mice developed arthritis, arterial and neural
plaques; their bones turned thin and brittle, their
skin deteriorated. Even at barely a year old, the mice
became suddenly and irrevocably old. Team Sigil named
this newly discovered “aging gene” Klotho, after the
Greek Goddess who spun the thread of life.

In January 2012, an expanded Sigil team
began working doggedly to explore and better
understand the Klotho gene, and by the
following year, the team was making
significant discoveries.



First, in February, using designer plasmids, the researchers actually managed to breed a batch of mice with overactive Klotho genes. And what the researchers found was that these new Klotho-mice ended up living about a full year longer than normal mice--a 35% increase in lifespan. The team was elated, and orders were given to divert more funding, more resources, to exploration of Klotho. It was thought that if the researchers could make a bigger breakthrough, say, get a batch of Klotho mice to live 100% longer, the doors would open for expanded trials.

For the next two years, the Sigil team's research boomed, but little progress was made. The team tried all manner of chemical and bacterial aggravators, but nothing seemed to stimulate a mature Klotho gene into hyperactivity beyond that 35% mark. Then, finally, in December 2013, the team made a breakthrough; they discovered an enzyme that appeared to be responsible for the restriction and modulation of the Klotho gene--an enzyme that kept the Klotho gene from overproducing peptides.

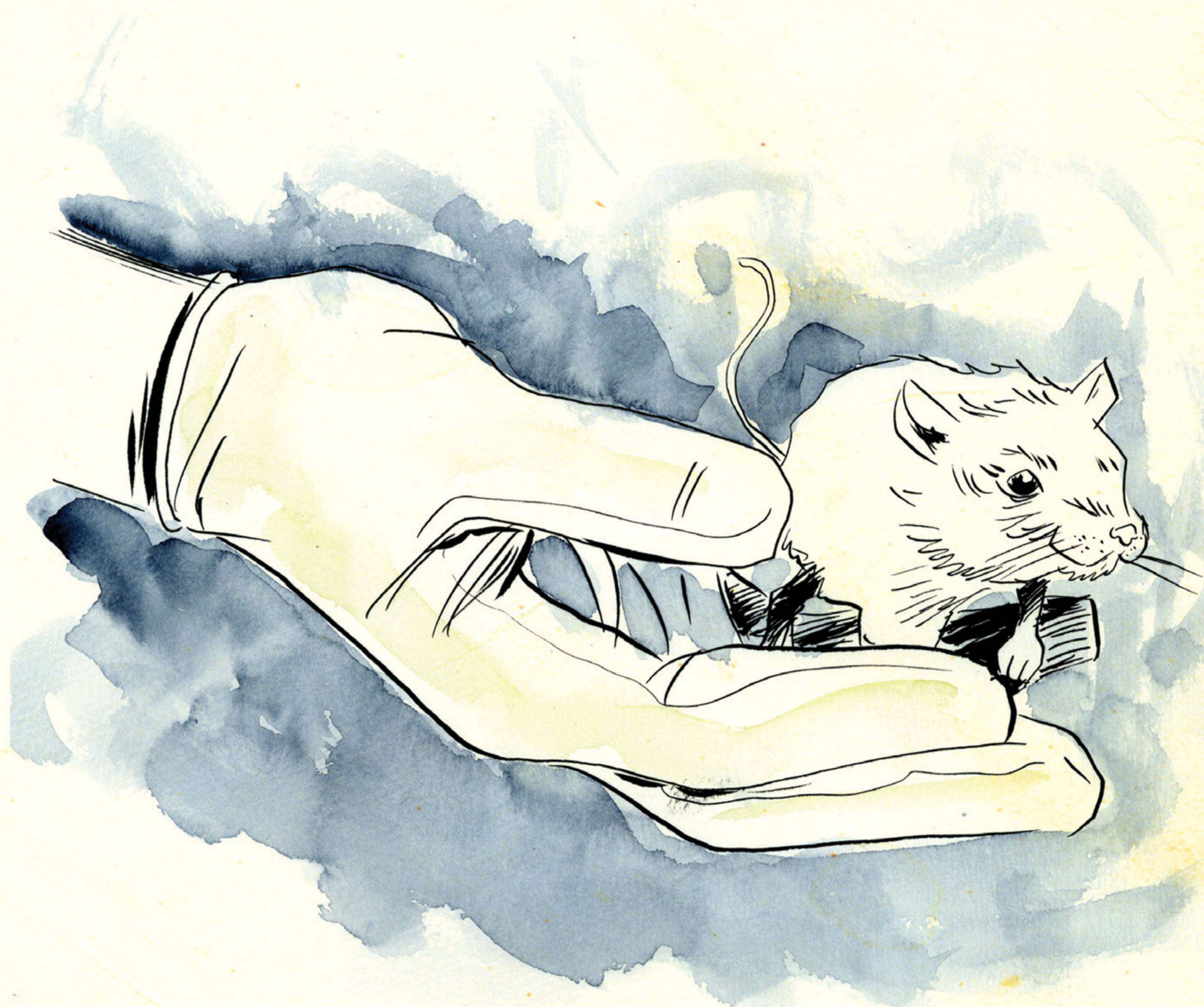
So in early 2014, team Sigil changed tacks. No, they hadn't been able to stimulate mature Klotho genes into hyperactivity, but maybe, by inhibiting a Klotho restrictor, they might unleash the gene to produce more peptides. The idea was: what if, instead of trying to soup up your car to outrun the cops, you simply took the cops off the road?

By the end of the year, team Sigil had developed an inhibitor that looked promising, and on December 31st, the team tested this inhibitor on a group of mature lab mice. One week passed. Two weeks. Three weeks went by, with no substantive reaction in the mice.

The team grew skeptical; word began to spread through the research community that the treatment was a failure.

Three of the team's assistant leads actually began searching for openings at other laboratories.

But then, suddenly, to everyone's surprise, in January 2015, the mice began to show signs of cellular rejuvenation. Their coats thickened; their bones grew denser, stronger, and more pliable. Cataracts disappeared, leaving their little eyes glassy and pink; muscle tissue became more elastic--the mice could scamper again, could reach on hind legs. They could no longer reproduce, and the span of memory did not seem to increase with the span of life, but overall, upon taking Klothovan, the mice grew young. And they stayed young, showing no signs of cellular decay, until treatment was stopped, at which point the mice resumed aging at a natural and recognized pace.



All that remained was to prove the Klotho gene worked the same way in humans. In children with progeria, the fast aging disease, the link was inconclusive. But if they could get their hands on a patient with an inverted variation of the syndrome, a patient in whom aging had been prohibited...

And so Claire.

And me.

And Klothovan.

Here is what I wrote about how Klothovan felt for me, the first time I was dosed. My notes, copied verbatim:

"Beman, the man in the bow tie, was right. It's like champagne.

"There's no pain, no keeling over and writhing. Just this low, warm tingling all over. Like a wave sizzling on the beach, like you're a sand moat filling with surf. This feeling in every cell that you're being...refilled? Plumped up.

"It's like you suddenly realize how depleted your body was. The wrinkled sacks of your knees. The tired weaving in your shoulders. They become new and strong and, all at once, you realize how worn down you were. You were a glass half empty, even if you saw yourself as half full.

"And now all I can think about is the biological capital of youth. That essence, that thing that you have as a kid, a physical element, but a psychological, even spiritual element--a deep, cellular knowledge that you are rich in life. You have the stuff that matters most. You are buoyant with it. Buoyant. You see it in that way teenagers look at you...that sly, slow-blinking way. Like they're looking down even when they're looking up at you, like: I might have acne, I might not be having sex yet, I might not have money or freedom or anything, but I'm richer than you, because I am FULL.

"I am full.

"I will go down the mountain and be a better person now.

"They will help Claire up here, and I will take her down.

"The next time I write, I will be proud of myself."

These were my words. I am nearly twenty-five cycles in, centuries, and I no longer remember my childhood. Have only notes on the years after my first time taking the cure.

And yet, looking back over them, there is nothing optimistic about my descriptions of the retreat and its relation to the world below.

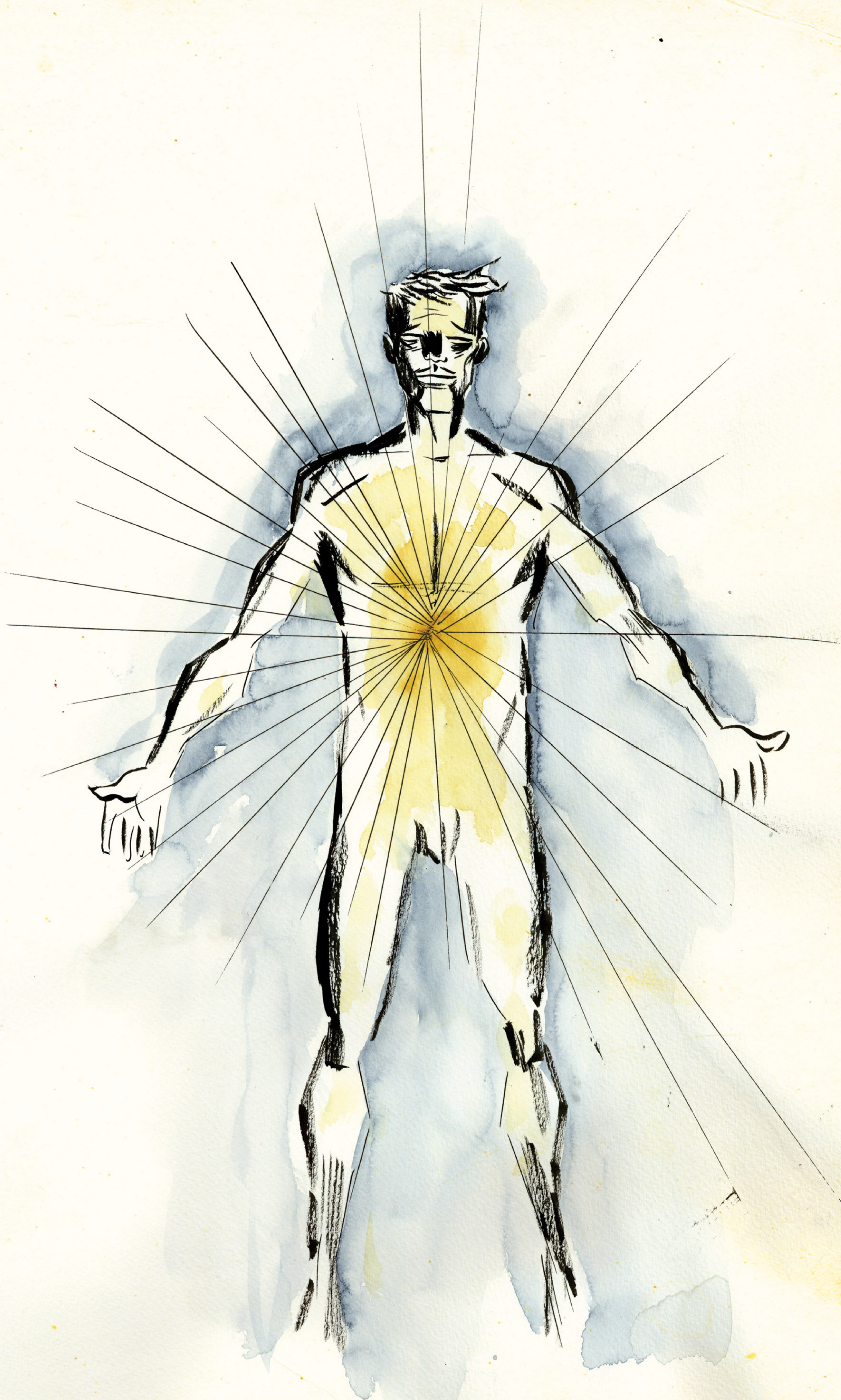
My notes are like this:

"The lodging is being expanded. We're taking in another three hundred, maybe four hundred people within the year.

"Looking for ways to put Klothovan in the water, which will make it easier.

"No news on Claire.

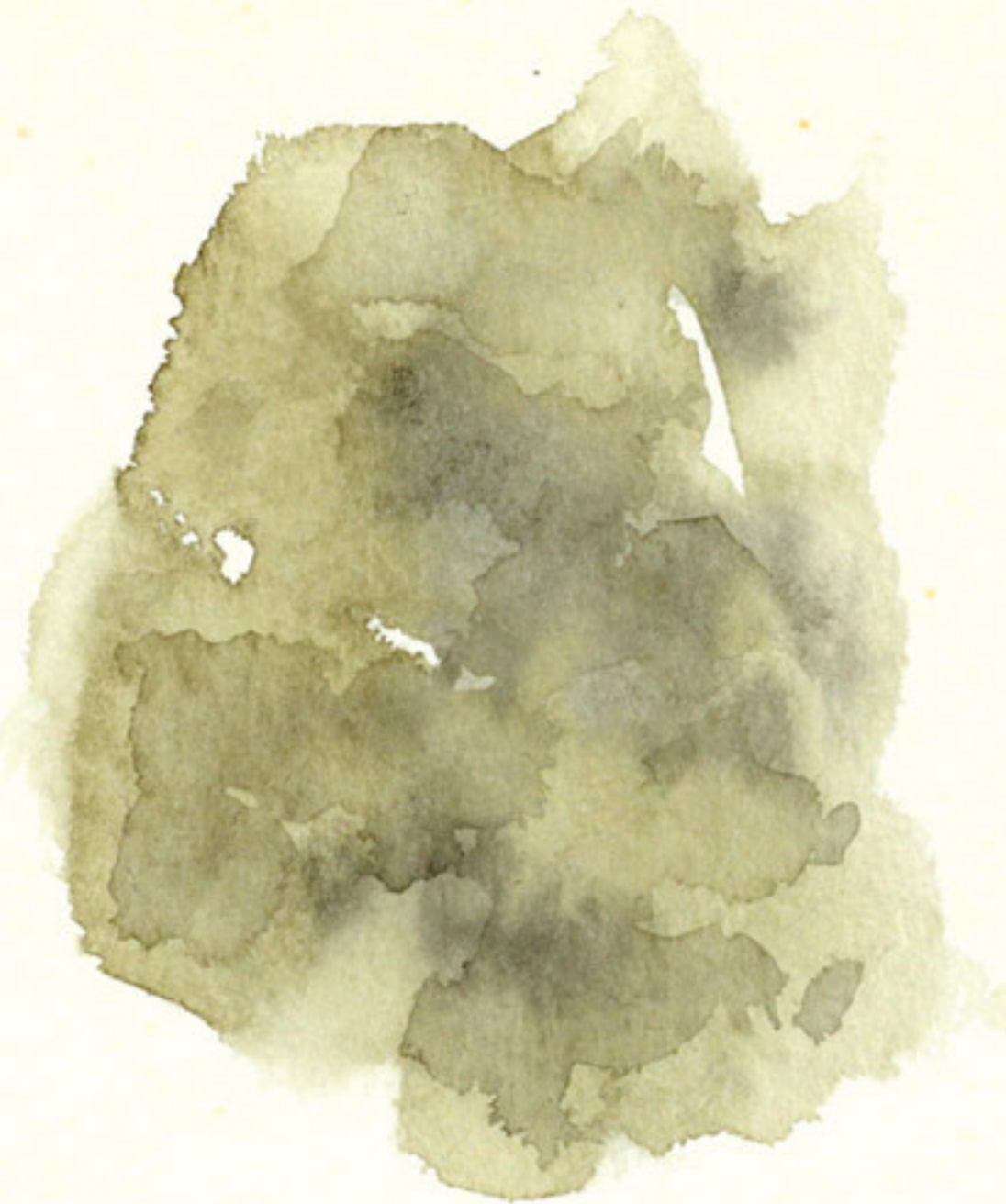
"Errant says patience, hopefully a version will help her...he is working on a song that he says..."



My notes on the world below make it clear
I did go down the mountain a few times in
that first decade.

Some are erased. Some are still here.

What's clear is that things below worsened very
quickly, in a matter of years, not even decades.
Worsened in the ways you'd expect, yes--in power
failures and dwindling resources--but even more
so through a kind of continued, frantic retreat
from one another...countries backing away. People
backing away within those countries. A kind of
entropic double spiraling...the collection of
units breaking apart, spinning outward and
farther from the center, while every single unit
spun tighter into itself. It wasn't just that the
center no longer held; it was the sense that the
center was the problem, the enemy, the thing to
escape. The center was a distraction from the
real conflicts, happening in YOUR life,
happening here at the edges, farther out.
The heart, it pumped out bad blood, bad
cells of information, was itself
made of bad stuff...



And then, one day,
it just happened...

Imagine, as I asked you to
earlier, pages ago, years ago, that
you are a member of the pygmy
tribe in the Congo.

You are small and dark-
skinned, and I am too.

Together, led by the goat,
that happy goat, we come across
that spot on the ground. The dry,
gray spot, charred and crackling.
The small frog dead inside.
The smell like
burnt hair.

Imagine what you feel, seeing it there. You back away as it advances, advances so fast, faster than you thought possible. It's like at sunset, all day the sun has just been there, not REALLY moving, but now, sinking against the trees, all you can see is how quickly the day is dying, how quickly it all goes...the shadow is at your feet.
Reaching. Spilling forward.

You feel all this, looking at the ashy spot. Watching the growth accelerate, watching the grass wilt at the edges, turn gray and crinkle up, bend and curl toward the earth.



What you don't know is that it's a kind of blight, engineered in a laboratory, a combination of brown moss blight and botulism. It has been made by your country, or maybe another--there's no telling anymore--and it has been made to draw people back to the center. It has been made to frighten them back from the edges. But something has gone wrong...a bug in one of the components has made the bacteria more resilient than expected. Who put the bug there?
Did we? Did they? Again, no one knows.

But the spot grows at an
exponential rate, every day.

Anything that crosses its path dies.

Will it cross water? Cross oceans?

It will.

It lives in seaborne algae and in
fish and in birds...

And now everyone is moving from the
cradle to the edges. The very edges,
to escape the Dying.

The retreat takes in more people, and
more, nearly four thousand, before
closing itself off. It is still a
secret place, thank God. No one knows
about the cure. And there is no sense
of it being a real refuge,
though it is.

But the spot grows at an
exponential rate, every day.

And for a while, months, there is
still word from below to listen to. Up
on the ridge, we listen. There is word
of masses of people trying to cross
the ocean, find some place to escape
the Dying. People digging bunkers.
People climbing mountains. People
running into the spot itself.

But, eventually, around 2050,
things below go black.



My notes in the years
after this are scribbles
and erasures that I have
copied here.

My last entry comes
around 2186:

"After two cycles more I am back with Inez and, still, all we want to do is go down. But there is no way. Without the cure, the Dying would kill us. And whatever's down there...

"The sky has changed, the clouds. They move at high speed, furiously torn apart and spun back together. What did they do to the sky? Was it a bomb? Was it chemical? Was it us?

"There are rumors that people below tried to climb the mountain, but that there are defenses now. Did we put them there in the early years? I have no notes on this. I can't remember. My neighbor Max says we did. Inez is not sure. Are they plants, the weapons? I heard they're plants. Maybe there are no defenses... Maybe the natural world has just...changed? Maybe the plants were changed by the Dying?

"We'll wait a while and listen, Inez and I. But we will make it down. At the FIRST SIGN things are okay, we will.

"We'll remind each other.

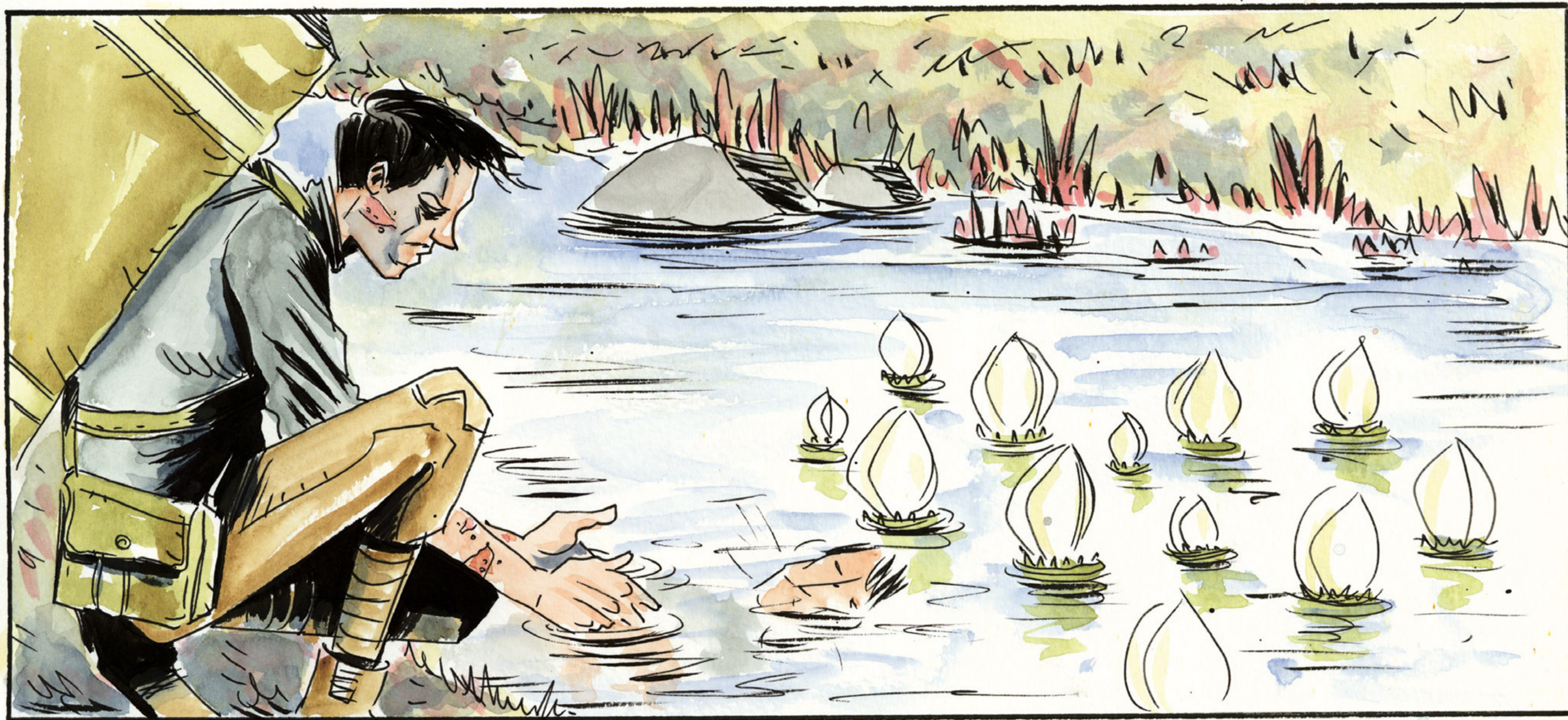
"An expedition called Forager is being planned. They will go down soon and send word back. They are bringing a boat with them to travel up the coast.

"We will wait for word from them. But we will be brave, we will."

And it's sometime around here that my notes stop altogether.

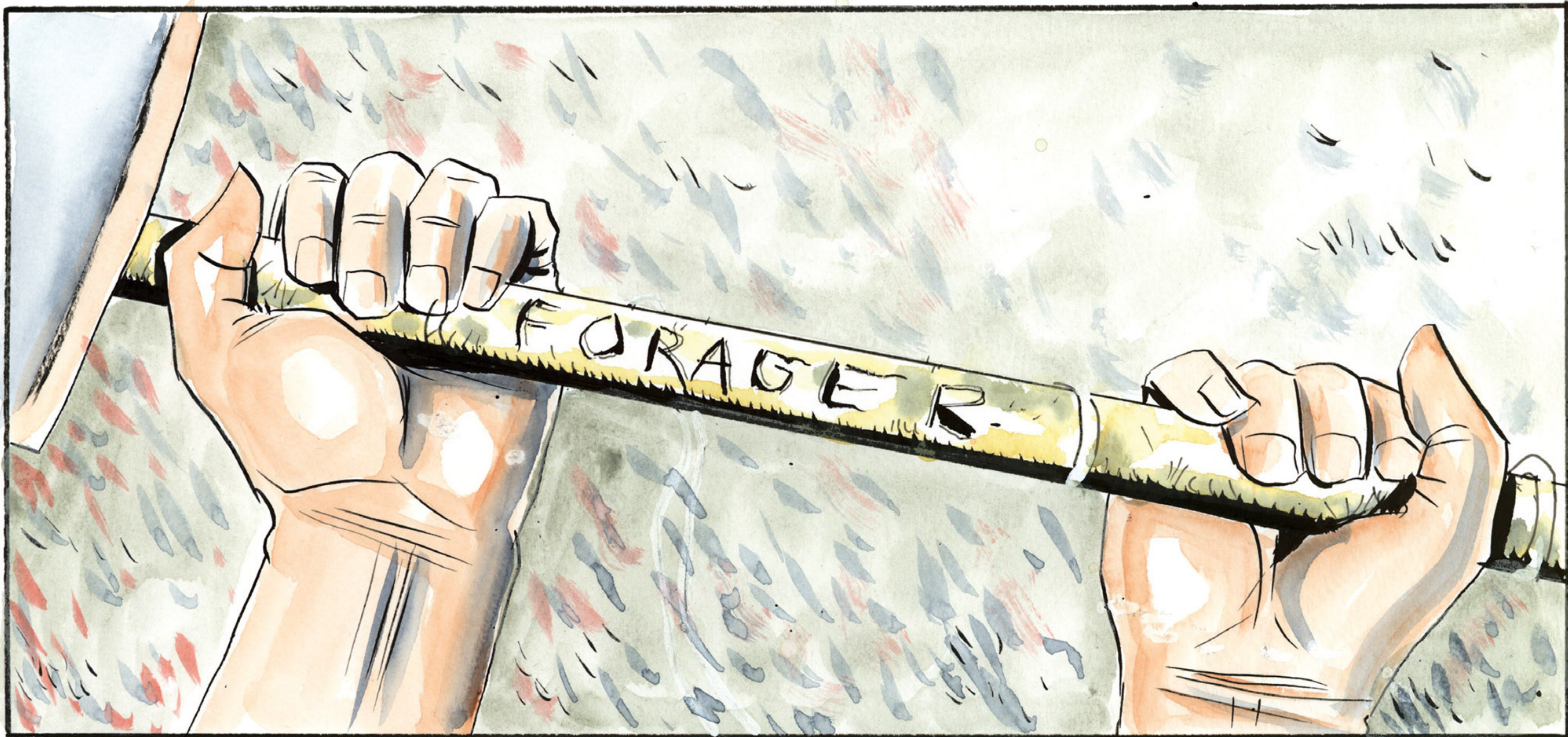














It always happens on a plain day, doesn't it?

Something that blows your life apart.

A boring morning. Clear, blue sky.

When you're concerned with details and distractions, lost in that context of busywork that makes a real event feel like a bomb.

I am nearly twenty cycles in when I find the journals.

An ocean of time since I stopped writing.

I have just come back from the night shift at Water when it happens.

I parted with someone not long before, a woman named Elena, and I am cleaning out the shed behind my home and I just...stumble on them. I'm not cleaning things out of anger, or sadness; it's just a small, lazy gesture of renewal.

I've become used to these gestures. I've grown comfortable, is the truth. My memory is fluid, but the memories of activities learned...the body wisdom remains.

Ghost skills...I know how to play the violin, the piano, the guitar...I know how to paint as well as some of the masters whose work I longed to steal so many years earlier, though I don't remember acquiring these talents.

There have always been new people to be with--have I been with them before? Maybe. But they will be new to me again. Everything will be, over and over. I have become my own island, in a way, this small, enclosed landscape I explore at my leisure, round and round, cycle after cycle, following a skill, a relationship, a desire toward small, harmless discoveries.

Do I know how to carve and build a table? I do.

Will I be happy with this woman for a while? Maybe.

I make findings, then let the ever-shifting sands cover them. Follow a river to the next hill.

The day I am cleaning the shed, I am doing just this: looking for some small discovery about myself to push me forward, something amusing or curious.



The books are on a shelf at the back of the shed. They sit in a row of unused journals and look no different from the empty ones. In truth, I nearly miss them altogether. The journals are simple and uninteresting. No cloth covers or fancy binding, just paper.

Each has a green silhouette of a tree on the front, nothing more.

I open one up and find blank pages inside.

I open another...the same. Blank.

I take the row off the shelf, planning to throw them out, when I notice two books that seem slightly darker than the rest. A little worn, a little smudged.

I open the first and see it's half full of writing. Notes.

I figure it belongs to Elena. She had a habit of writing down what she wanted to explore next, what cycle, what talent. Maybe this was hers. I sit down in the shed and read it.

"My first memory..." are the words.



Hours later, I am still sitting on the floor of the shed.

How to describe that feeling? Like you've somehow run aground while crossing the middle of the ocean. Like the ship of your life has become impaled on a hidden spike of rock.

My back ached, my jaw throbbed from clenching my teeth... Sitting there, I felt as I imagined it must have felt for me watching my mother fall that first time. Her body descending, cutting life into two halves, before and after.

Now this moment would be that for me--I knew it--the words on the page cleaving my life. I could not remember the life described, not exactly, but I could feel it there, beneath the surface. And this person, this man telling me about my life, the one written into the pages of this book...he was me. I could feel it. All the pain and fear...and who was I now? Who was the person who'd come into the shed? That was the horror of it.



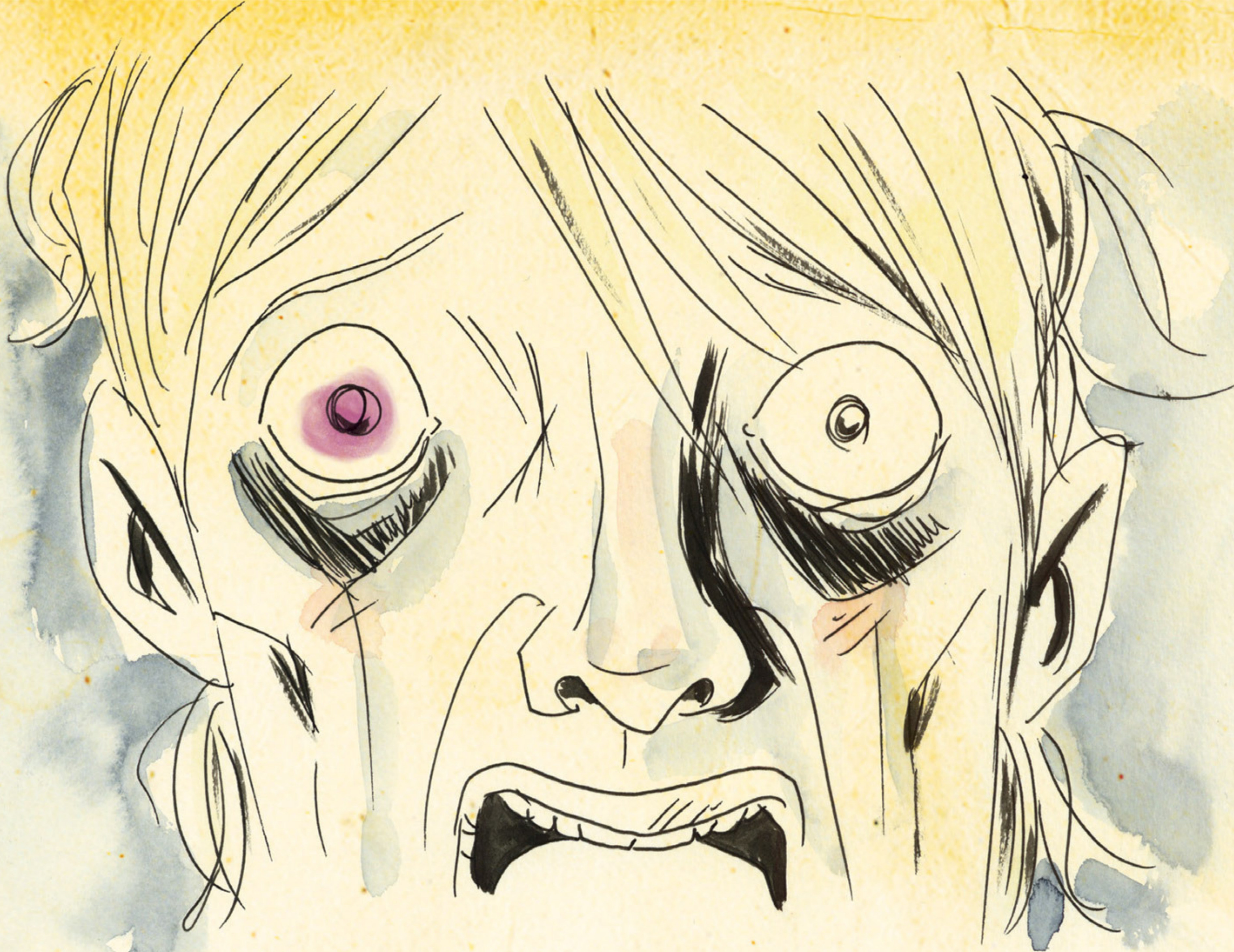
I thought of the last few cycles, the endless chain of days, of jobs, of people, Inez as a repeating link. Really it was a chain of nothing but me, though, wasn't it? A life curling around itself in an endless spiral.

I looked away from books at the ring of mountains in the distance. They looked too close all of a sudden, encroaching... the ring of jagged points like a heartbeat, going round and round and round...

The thing was, I had been happy.

That was the worst part. I'd been okay with it all, hadn't I?





My stomach seized, and I nearly threw up right there.

And something occurred to me then, a truth that just slammed into me with a nearly physical force. What I knew at that moment, sitting in my shed, was that I had been wrong. Wrong about everything, yes, but the moment that flashed through my mind was singular and specific. It was the same moment I'd told Errant about, the one that recurred and recurred. The instance at the end of my mother's life just before she'd died, when she was lying in her hospital bed, lost in the fantasy that my brother Nathan was alive and grown and that I was content too. I had no memory of her face but I could see it in my mind then, the warm, sleepy joy. I could picture it. Happy and relaxed. Everything was all right. She was in a good place. How she'd gotten here, she didn't know, but here she was.

And then it had come back to her.

The truth.

Nathan had died. She was dying. The distance between the person she wanted to be, and who she was, all suddenly apparent.

And the terror in her eyes...the horror at knowing the truth.

But that's where I was most wrong. I saw that now. All this time I'd thought her horror was at remembering--at seeing herself as she was, rather than how she'd hoped to be at the end.



But I knew now that wasn't the case at all; she hadn't been horrified at remembering.

She'd been horrified that she forgot in the first place.

That she'd lost her place in her own story.

I knew this to be true, because I felt that way now, felt it with every cell in my body.

And just as I knew this, I also knew who I was.

I was a thief. I was a liar, to others and to myself.

And above all, I was a coward.

A coward in every aspect of my life.

I said this to myself out loud, there in the shed. "I am a coward."

I had two books in my hand, both filled with notes about my life before this place, filled with longing and fear, and at my feet were all the empty books I was supposed to fill.

I said it again.

"I am a coward."

And then I got up.

I would not be a coward any longer. I would use the notes in the first two journals to write a new book, a third book, this one. A book that had a beginning, a middle, and above all, an end.

I would cycle through only to steal what I needed to get Claire. I would work Ridge and listen for some sign that there was anything but death below, and at the first signal, anything, I would go.

And as I decided this, I was flooded with relief. I was happy to know--that was the strange truth of it. I was glad to see myself as I was.

I would take Claire and finish my story.

I hurried to my car.

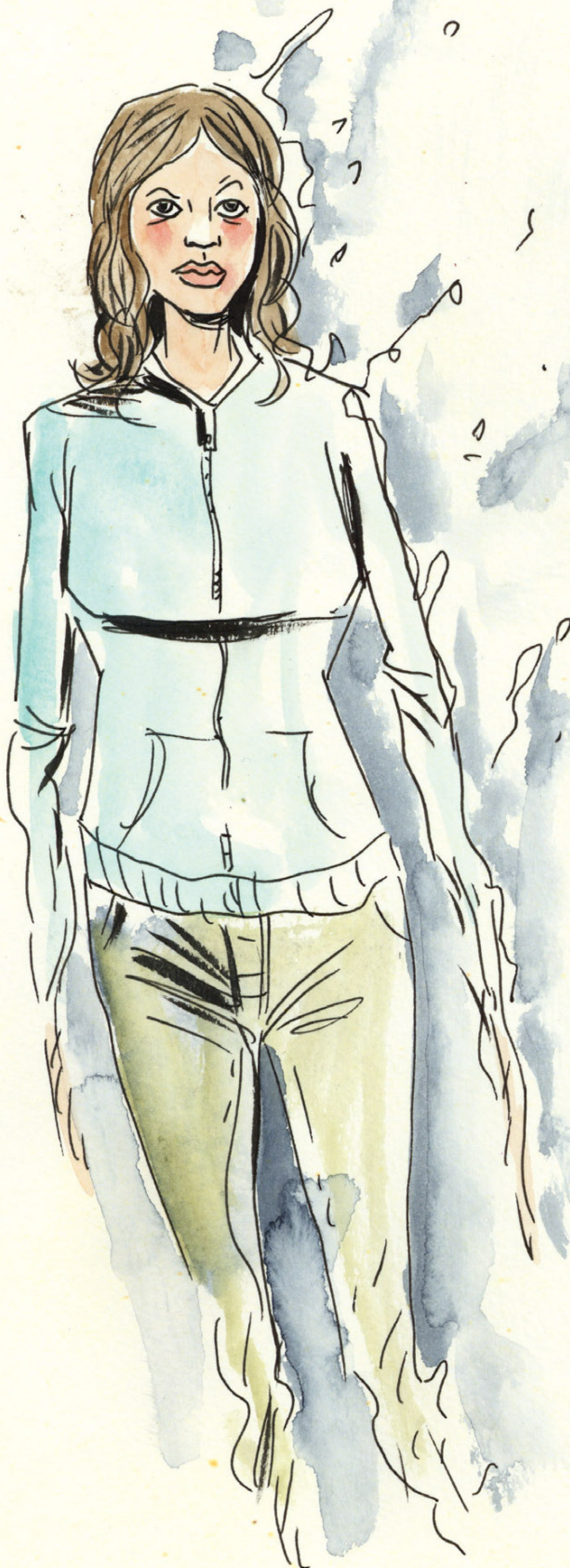
I had been with Inez not long before. She had begun to fade from memory, but just barely. We'd been together a long time, this much I knew. We'd had a good run. But now, as I thought back, I couldn't remember anything urgent about our relationship. I remembered walking by the wind turbines and making dinners my hands knew how to make... I remembered being fine, and this brought on another wave of nausea.

I shook off the feeling and looked through the queue for her address. She was living just across the retreat, on the other side of the reservoir, by Agro.

I drove over that afternoon, the journals with me. As I drove past the reservoir, I thought about what I'd say to her. She'd forgotten what she'd wanted to do, who she'd been, as I had too. But she would come back to herself when I showed her. She would look at the books, and at me...we would find our way out of this place together. Make each other brave.

I reached her house. It was a small, white cape nestled in a line of other homes. A nice street, with moon-lawns of deep blue-green grass. Again, I had the strange feeling that I was looking at something stolen as I approached the door...the lane like something lifted from the world below and set down here, thousands of feet in the sky. Everything out of context. She liked being around other people. I remembered this about her now. She liked being in town.

I parked and walked up to her door. On the lawn beside hers, a greener crawled about, clicking like a bug.



I knocked on the door and waited.

I took a deep breath. This would work, I thought. This was going to work. And just then I saw the mat I was standing on.

Her father's mat, the one from her story.

I quickly stepped off of it, knowing now what it had meant to her.

I actually went to brush it off, but as did I saw how deeply worn the thing was. The fibers all torn, the words faded. Little continents of mold at the corners.

I heard footsteps from inside.

As they neared, a terrible thought occurred to me: maybe she'd wanted to forget? Maybe she wasn't who I thought she was.

The door lock clicked open.

No, I thought. She'd forgotten what the mat had meant to her, and now I would tell her. I would tell her everything and she would be grateful to me. We would go down together.

We would go back to where we left off...





...and pick up right there.

ZZZZ...
JONAH...IF
YOU'RE
THERE...



HELLO!
HELLO, I'M HERE.
FORAGER? IS
THIS YOU?



FORAGER,
COME IN!

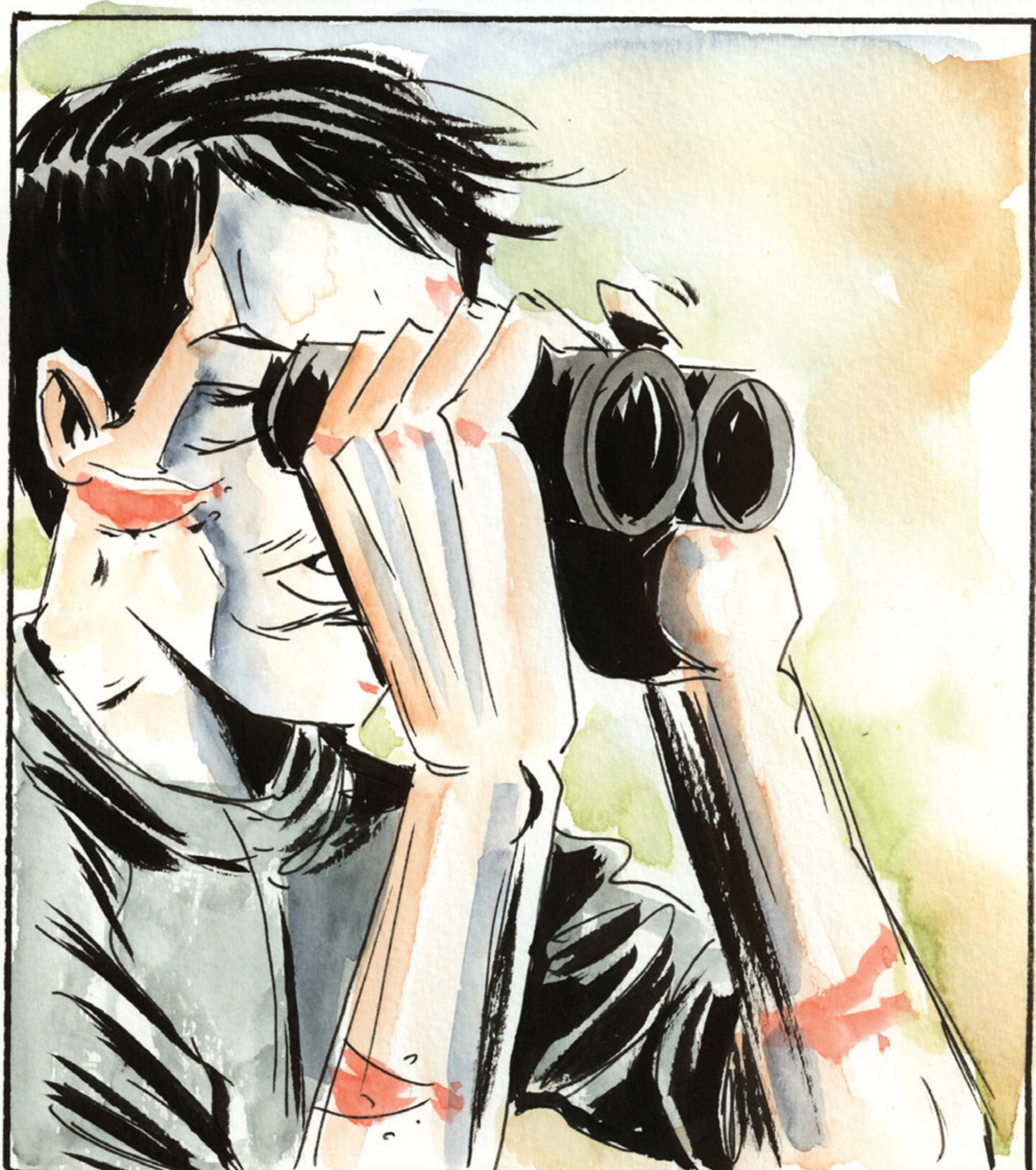


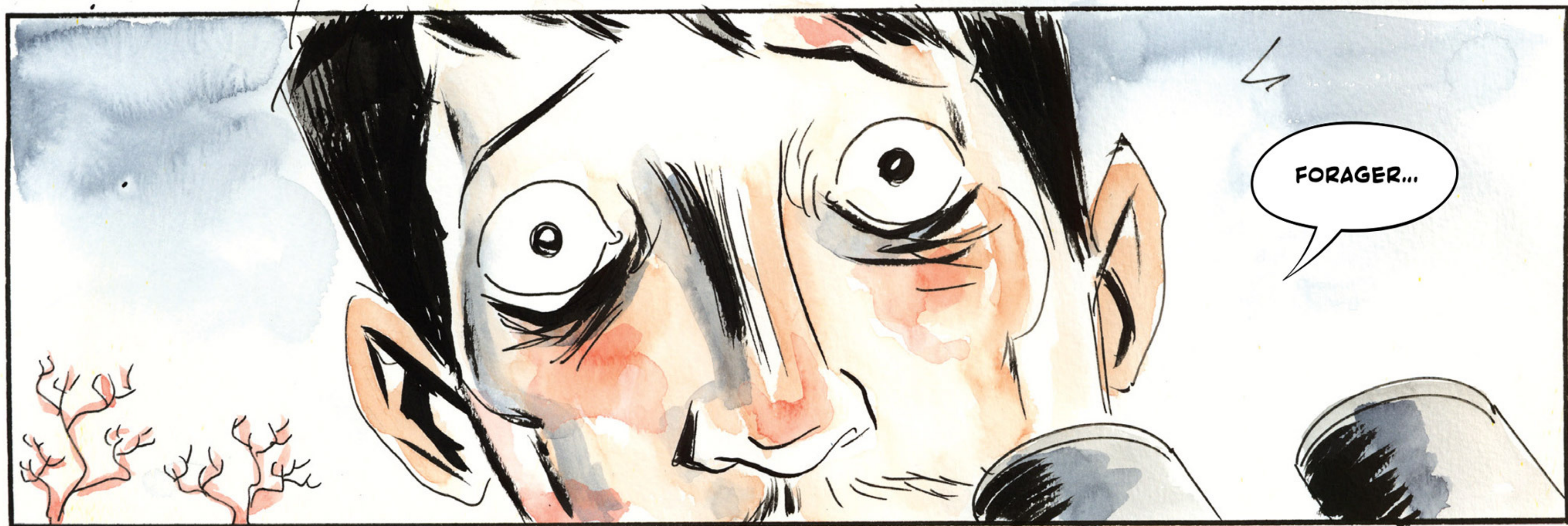
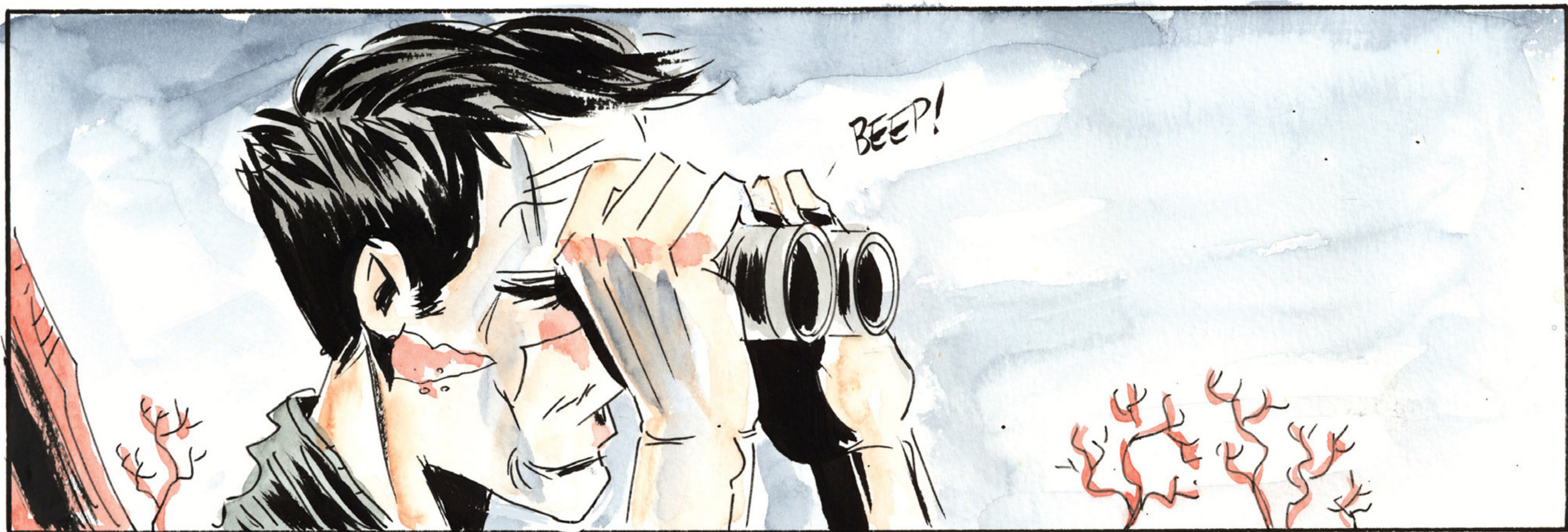
ARE
YOU--

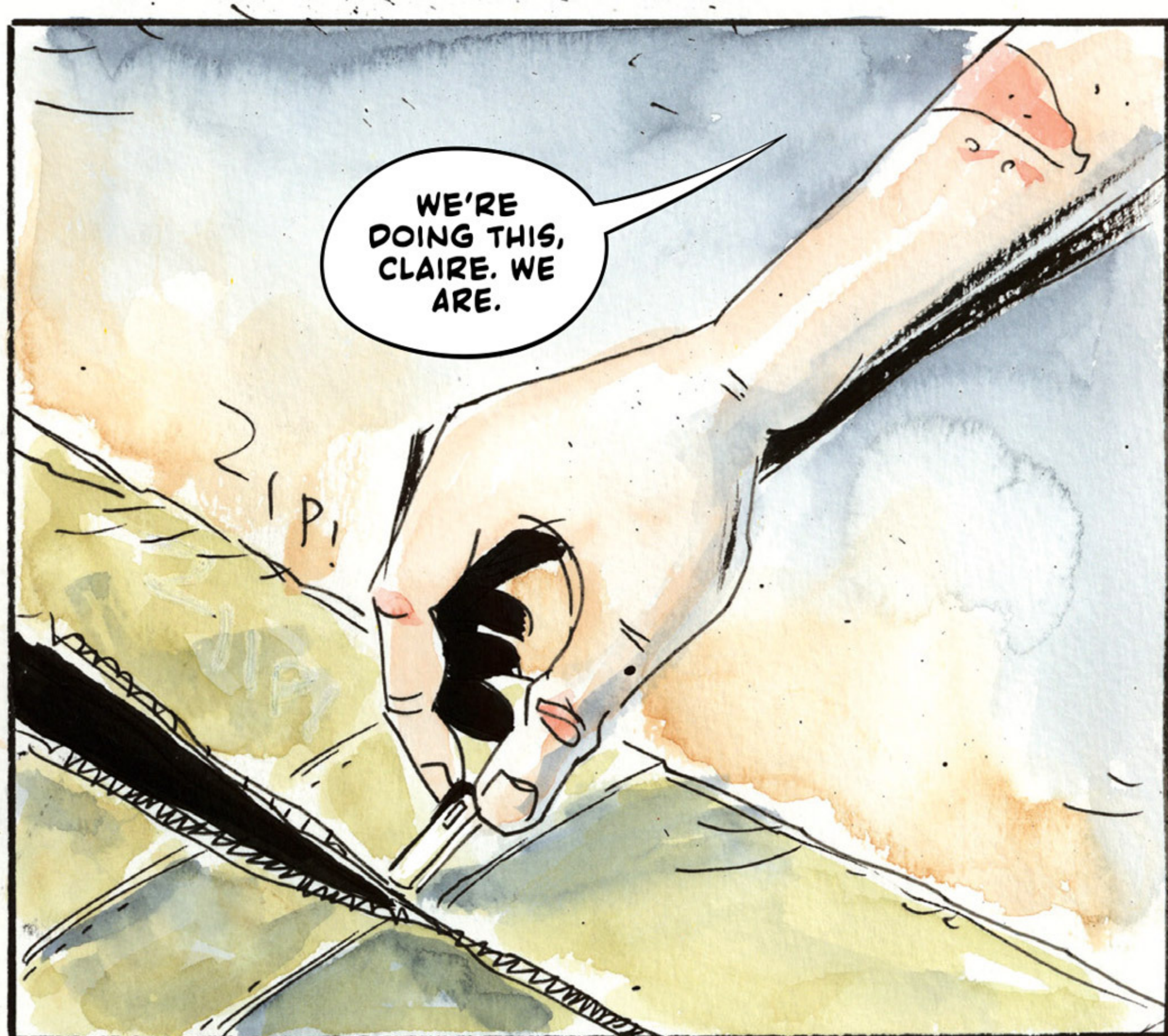
TSSSTT...
IT'S BY THE
SHORE.

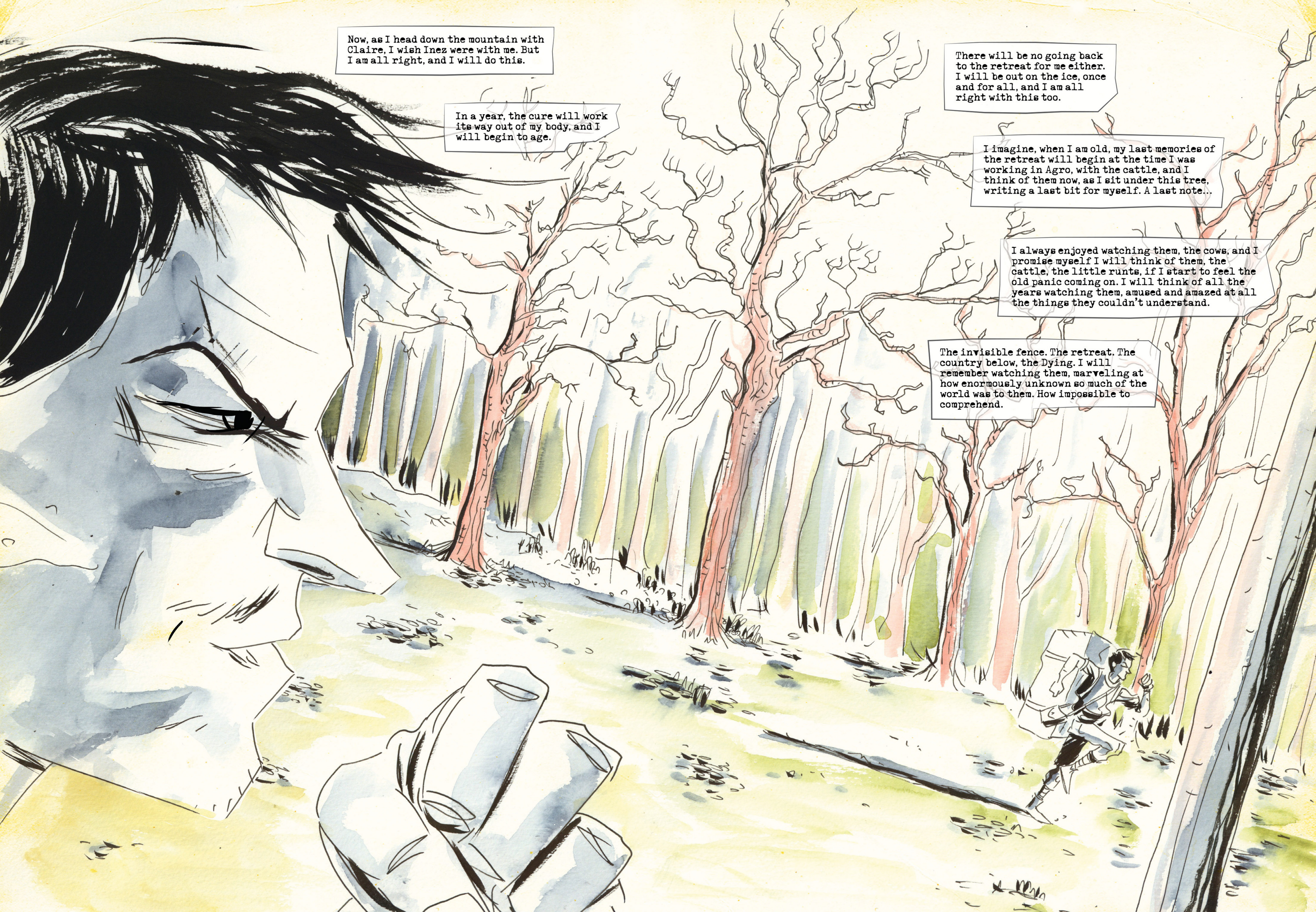


...IF YOU
CAN HEAR
THIS, LOOK
FOR IT...
TSSSS









Now, as I head down the mountain with Claire, I wish Inez were with me. But I am all right, and I will do this.

In a year, the cure will work its way out of my body, and I will begin to age.

There will be no going back to the retreat for me either. I will be out on the ice, once and for all, and I am all right with this too.

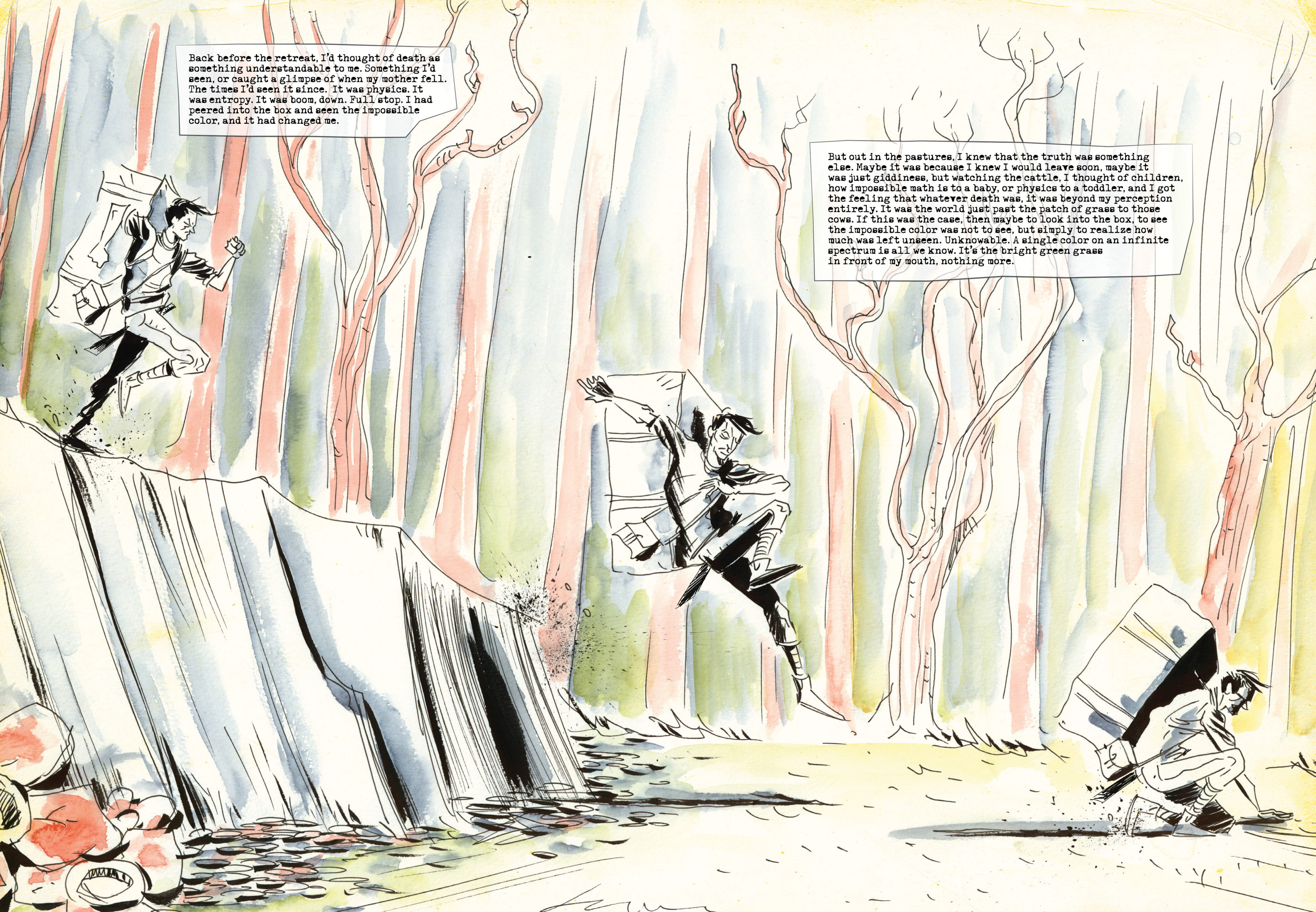
I imagine, when I am old, my last memories of the retreat will begin at the time I was working in Agro, with the cattle, and I think of them now, as I sit under this tree, writing a last bit for myself. A last note...

I always enjoyed watching them, the cows, and I promise myself I will think of them, the cattle, the little runts, if I start to feel the old panic coming on. I will think of all the years watching them, amused and amazed at all the things they couldn't understand.

The invisible fence. The retreat. The country below, the Dying. I will remember watching them, marveling at how enormously unknown so much of the world was to them. How impossible to comprehend.

Back before the retreat, I'd thought of death as something understandable to me. Something I'd seen, or caught a glimpse of when my mother fell. The times I'd seen it since. It was physics. It was entropy. It was boom, down. Full stop. I had peered into the box and seen the impossible color, and it had changed me.

But out in the pastures, I knew that the truth was something else. Maybe it was because I knew I would leave soon, maybe it was just giddiness, but watching the cattle, I thought of children, how impossible math is to a baby, or physics to a toddler, and I got the feeling that whatever death was, it was beyond my perception entirely. It was the world just past the patch of grass to those cows. If this was the case, then maybe to look into the box, to see the impossible color was not to see, but simply to realize how much was left unseen. Unknowable. A single color on an infinite spectrum is all we know. It's the bright green grass in front of my mouth, nothing more.



And if this is so, then, really, the only thing to do is to give in to the mystery of it, right? It's a thought I've had a thousand times before, sure, but now, here, on this mountain, Claire beside me, I feel it.

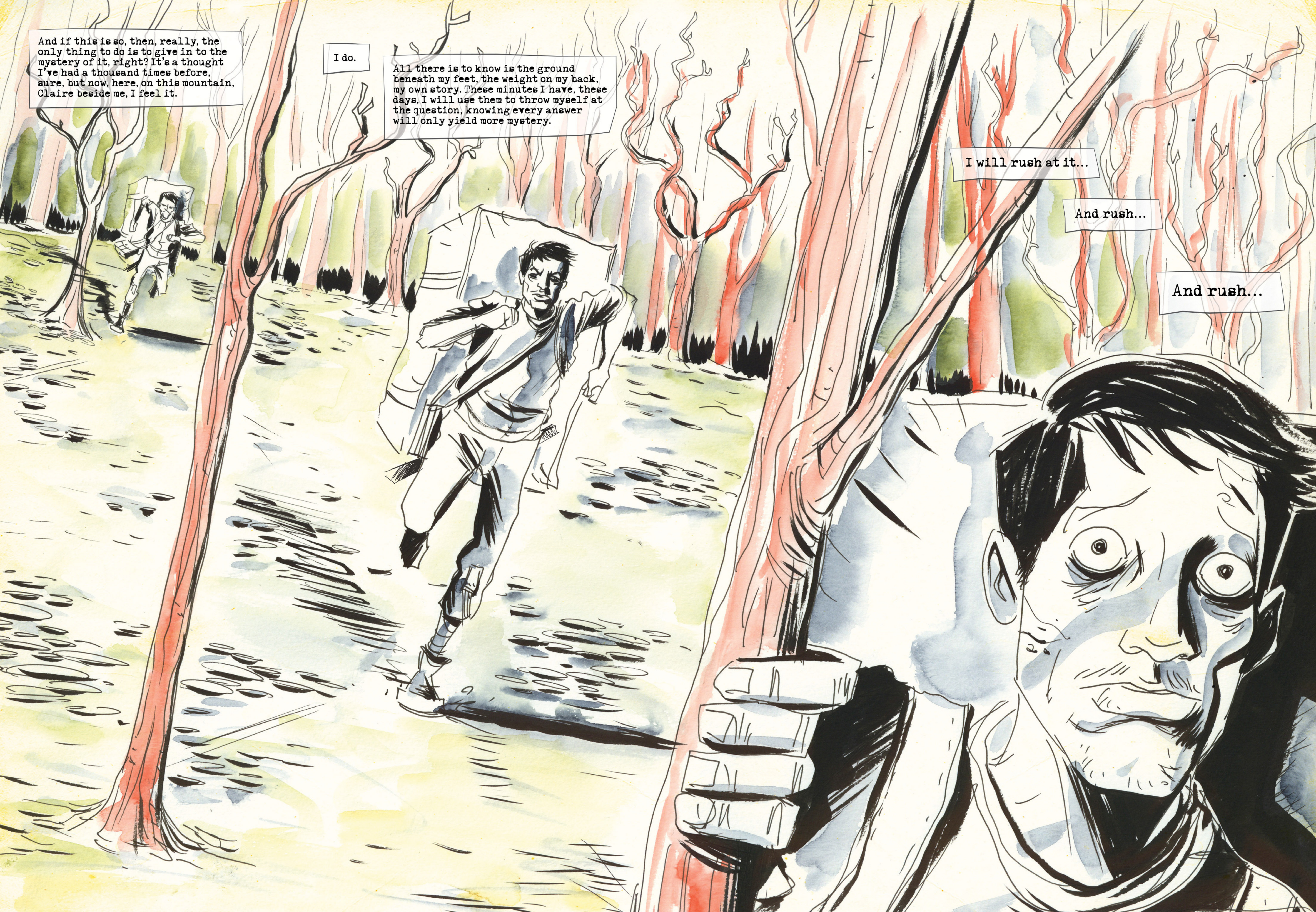
I do.

All there is to know is the ground beneath my feet, the weight on my back, my own story. These minutes I have, these days, I will use them to throw myself at the question, knowing every answer will only yield more mystery.

I will rush at it...

And rush...

And rush...



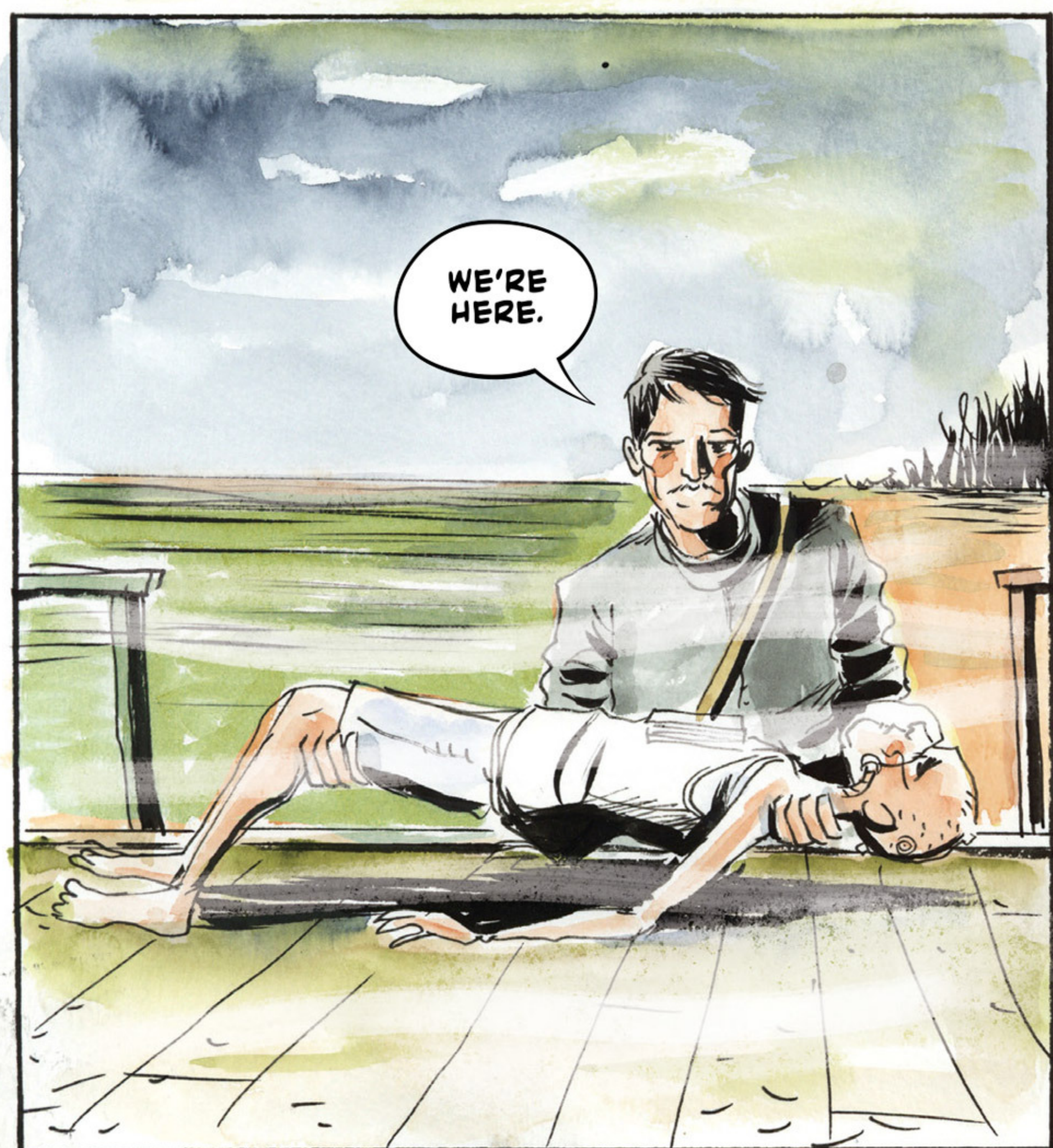




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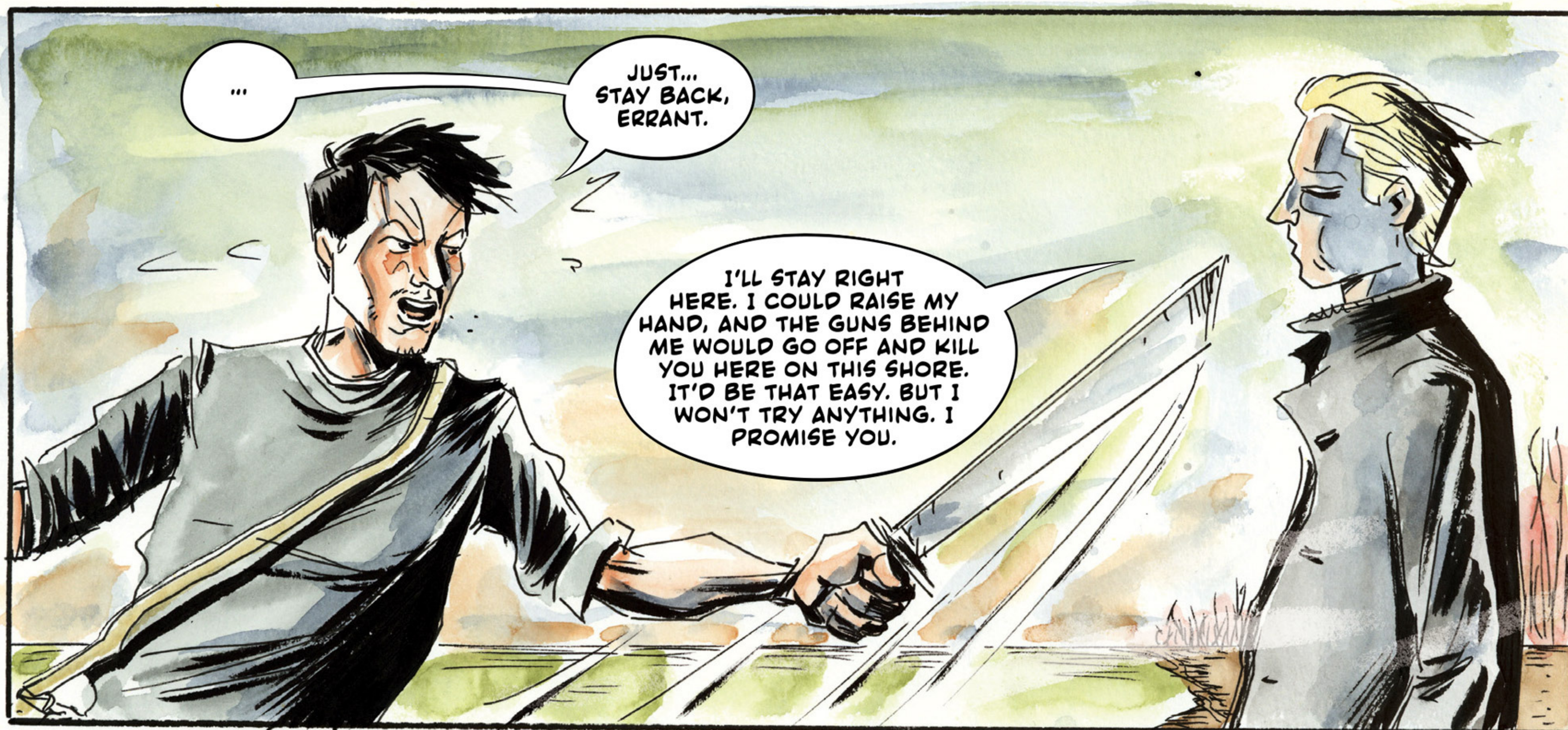
WE
MADE IT.

WE DID
IT.





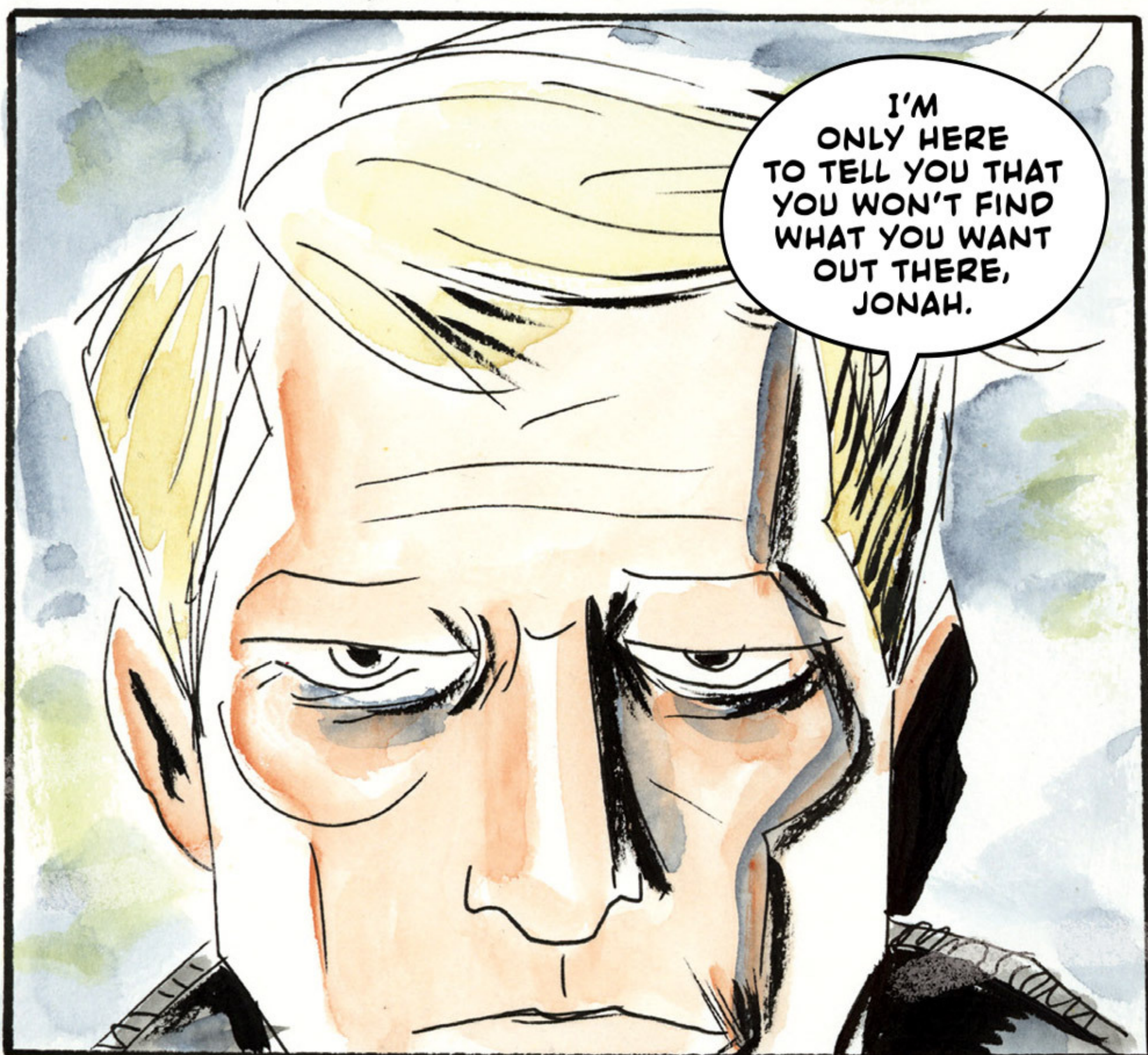
YOU
DON'T
WANT TO
DO THIS.



...

JUST...
STAY BACK,
ERRANT.

I'LL STAY RIGHT
HERE. I COULD RAISE MY
HAND, AND THE GUNS BEHIND
ME WOULD GO OFF AND KILL
YOU HERE ON THIS SHORE.
IT'D BE THAT EASY. BUT I
WON'T TRY ANYTHING. I
PROMISE YOU.



I'M
ONLY HERE
TO TELL YOU THAT
YOU WON'T FIND
WHAT YOU WANT
OUT THERE,
JONAH.



JUST STOP.
STOP! I'M
GOING, AND I'M
TAKING HER
WITH ME.

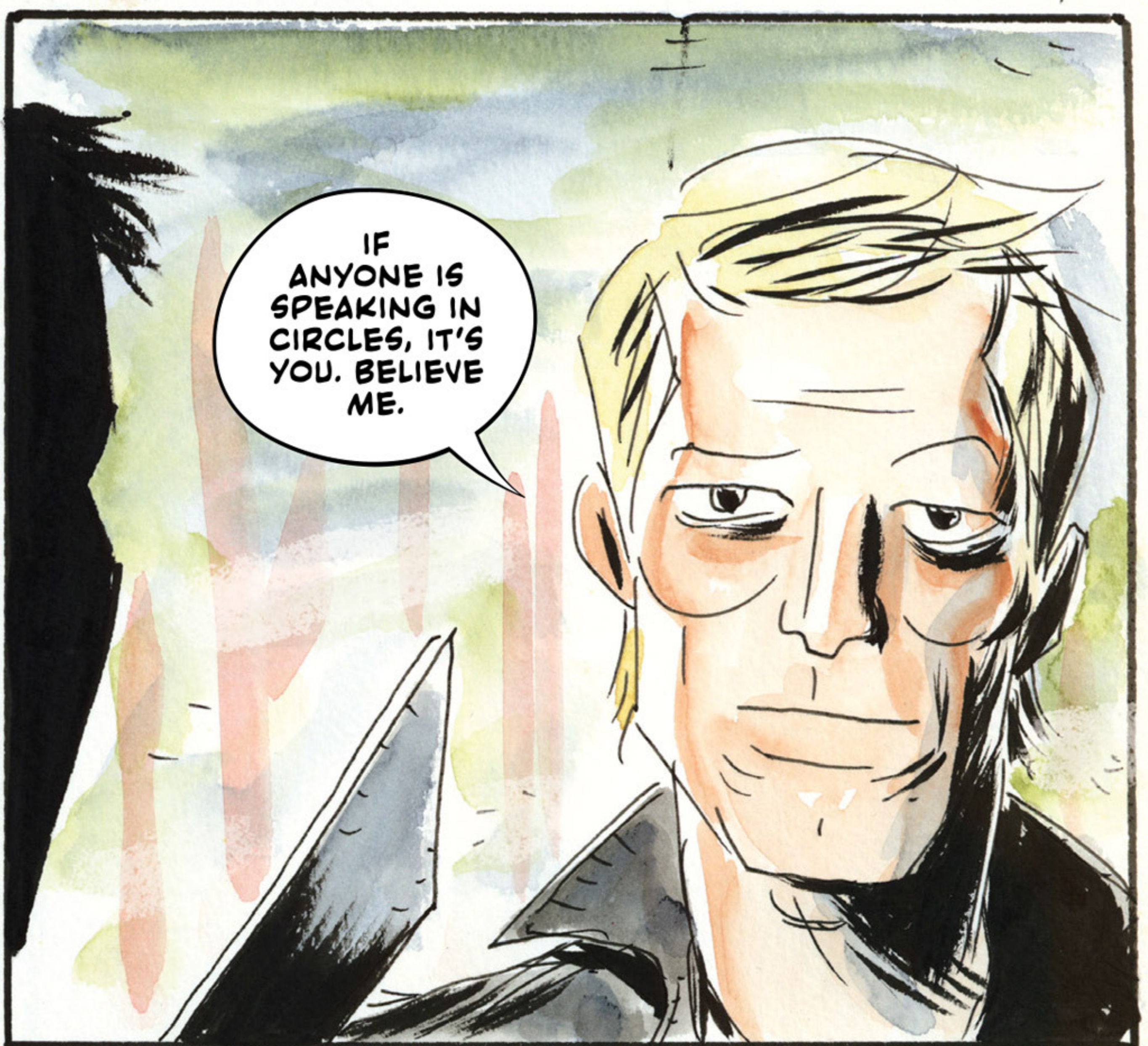
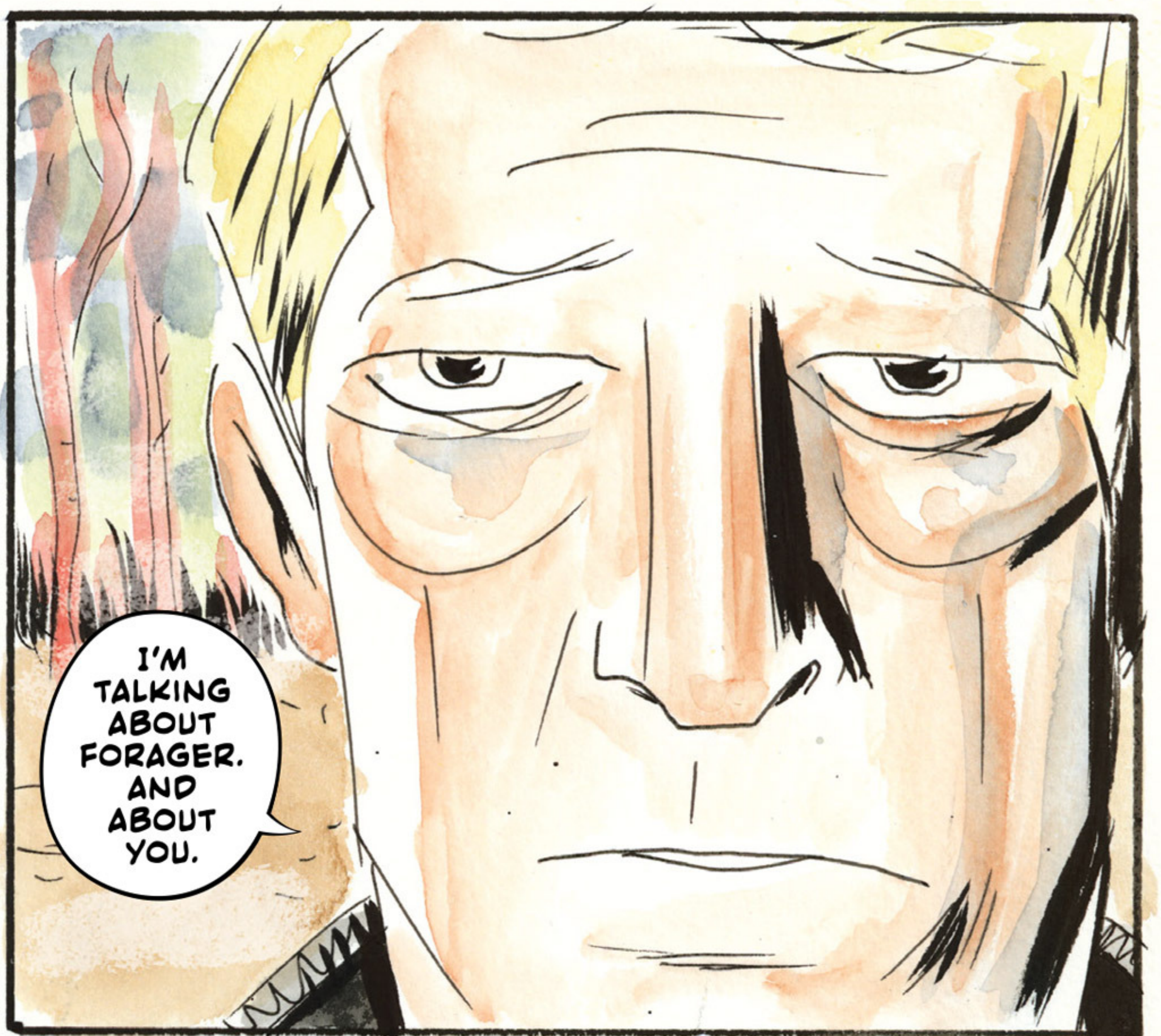
YOU DON'T
NEED HER FOR
ANYTHING
ANYMORE.



YOU DON'T NEED
ME. JUST LET US GO.
LET US GO FOLLOW THE
SIGNAL. I HEARD IT,
ERRANT.

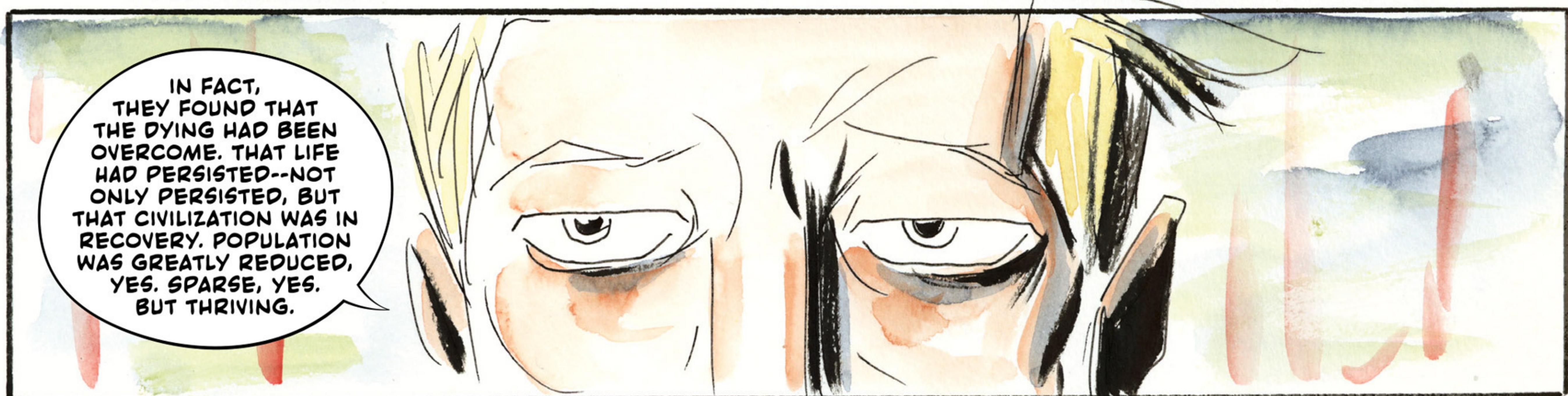
THERE'S LIFE OUT
THERE. FORAGER
FOUND SOMETHING,
SOMETHING THAT'S
STILL ALIVE,
AND--

THE SIGNAL
IS REAL, YES.
BUT I'M AFRAID
IT'S NOT WHAT
YOU THINK.

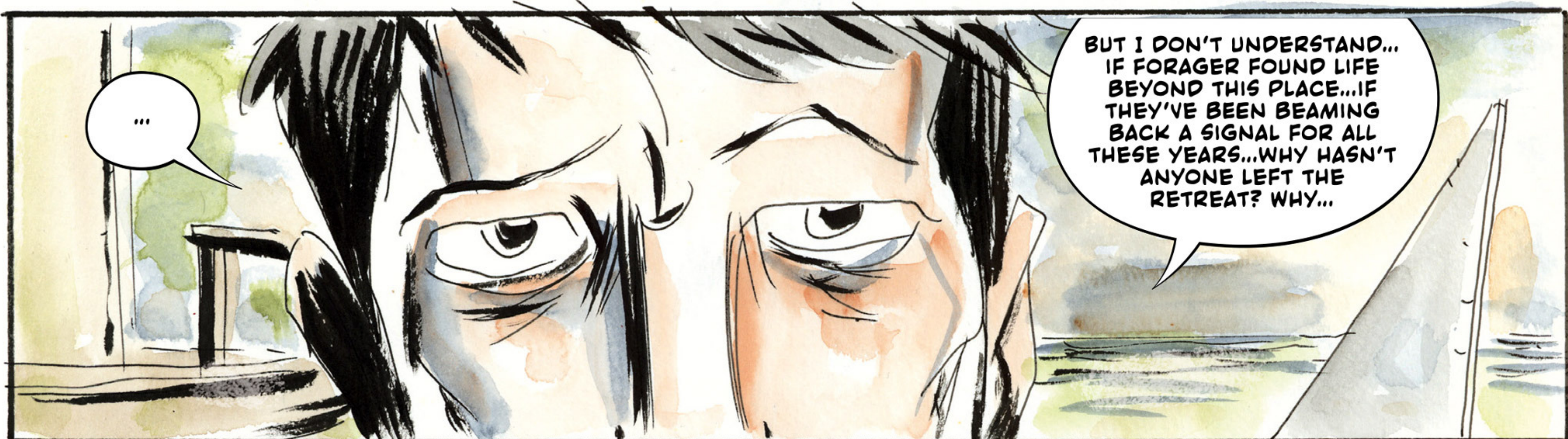




THE
SIGNAL IS
FROM FORAGER,
JONAH. AND
THEY DID FIND
LIFE OUT THERE,
MANY YEARS
AGO...



IN FACT,
THEY FOUND THAT
THE DYING HAD BEEN
OVERCOME. THAT LIFE
HAD PERSISTED--NOT
ONLY PERSISTED, BUT
THAT CIVILIZATION WAS IN
RECOVERY. POPULATION
WAS GREATLY REDUCED,
YES. SPARSE, YES.
BUT THRIVING.



BUT I DON'T UNDERSTAND...
IF FORAGER FOUND LIFE
BEYOND THIS PLACE...IF
THEY'VE BEEN BEAMING
BACK A SIGNAL FOR ALL
THESE YEARS...WHY HASN'T
ANYONE LEFT THE
RETREAT? WHY...

...

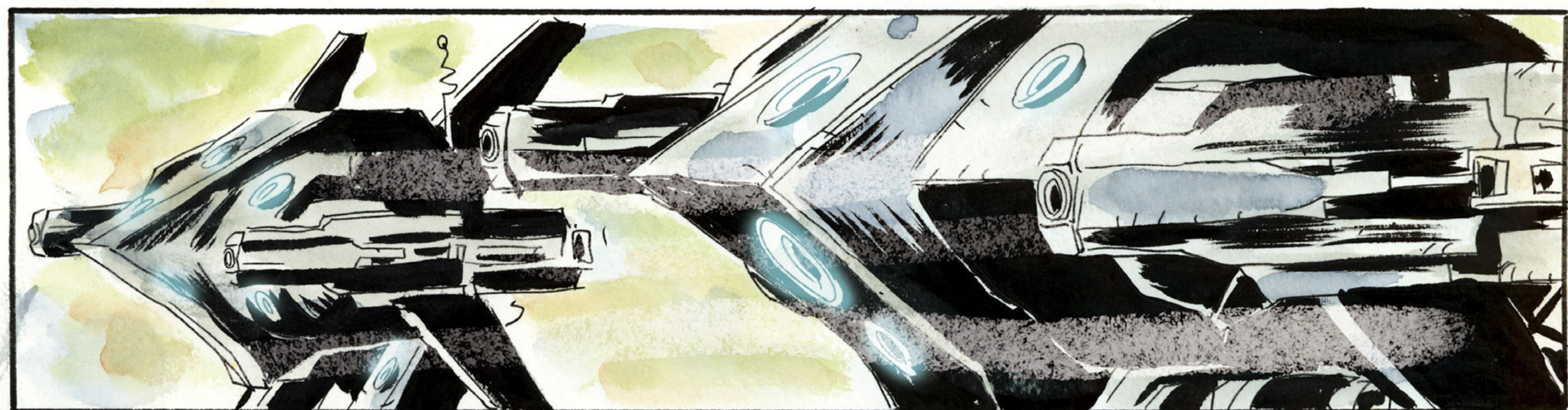


YOU?

YOU'VE KEPT
THIS INFORMATION
FROM EVERYONE.
YOU'VE KEPT US
TRAPPED.

ME, INEZ...CLAIRE...
EVERYONE. BECAUSE
YOU DIDN'T WANT US TO
LEAVE. SO YOU COULD
KEEP US UP THERE,
YOUR GODDAMN
STOLEN--

GUNS.





NO, JONAH. I DIDN'T KEEP ANYTHING FROM ANYONE.

FORAGER CAME BACK AND ALERTED US. BUT NO ONE CHOSE TO LEAVE. NOT INEZ, NOT EVEN YOU.



ME?

I DIDN'T... I DIDN'T BELIEVE THEM?



THAT'S JUST IT, JONAH. YOU *WERE* THEM. FORAGER WAS YOU AND INEZ.

HELL, YOU NAMED THE EXPEDITION. AFTER A MISSION TAKEN BY SOME ASTRONAUT YOU CLAIMED TO KNOW BEFORE ALL OF THIS. YOU SAID IT WAS ABOUT RETURNING TO EARTH AGAINST ALL ODDS. FORAGER. YOU WENT OUT, SAW THE RECOVERY, BUT YOU STILL CAME BACK.



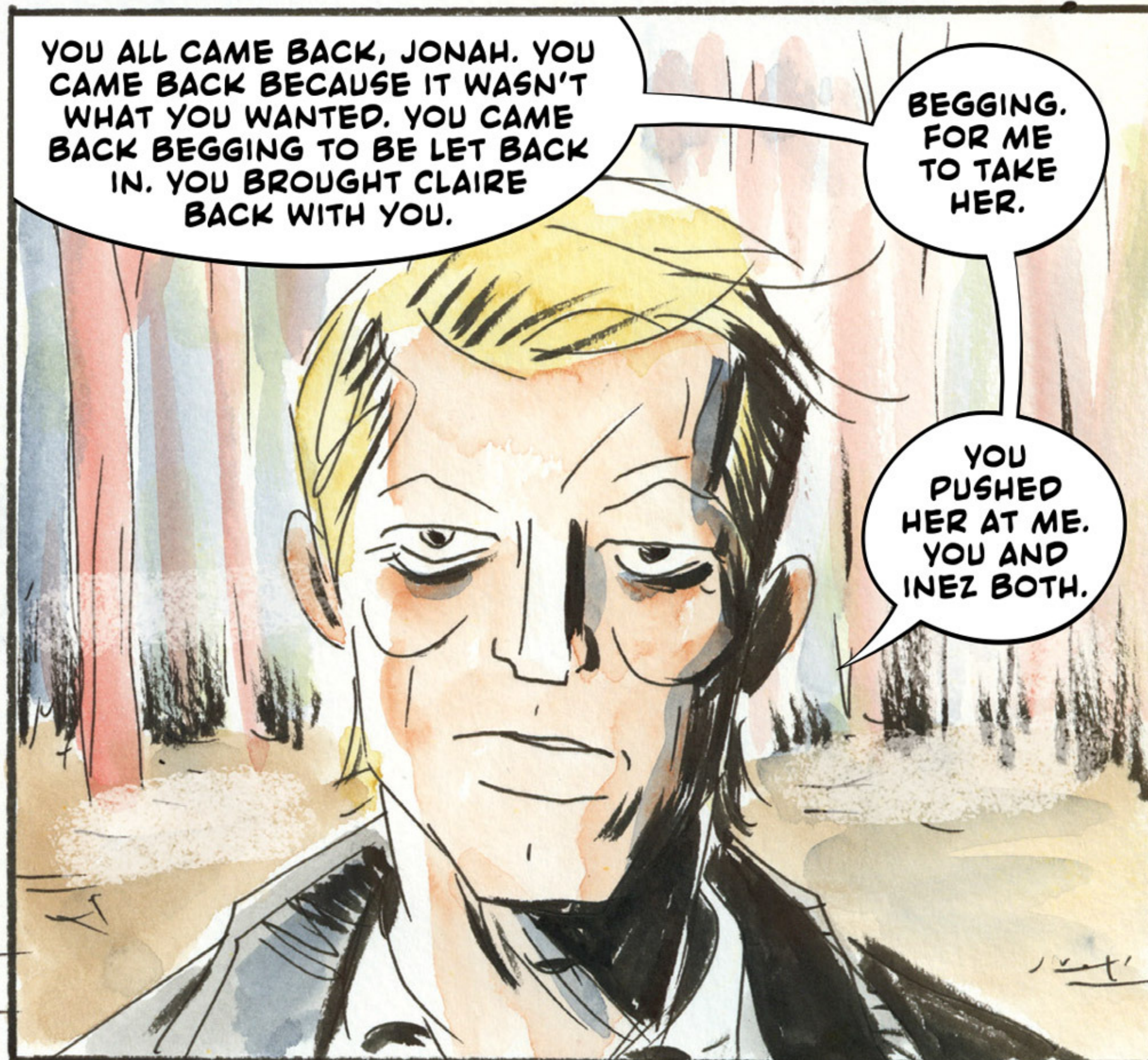
ME?

THAT DOESN'T MAKE SENSE. WHY WOULD I...

CLAIRE? I CAME BACK FOR CLAIRE?



TELL ME THAT WAS WHY I CAME BACK, ERRANT. PLEASE.



YOU ALL CAME BACK, JONAH. YOU CAME BACK BECAUSE IT WASN'T WHAT YOU WANTED. YOU CAME BACK BEGGING TO BE LET BACK IN. YOU BROUGHT CLAIRE BACK WITH YOU.

BEGGING. FOR ME TO TAKE HER.

YOU PUSHED HER AT ME. YOU AND INEZ BOTH.



...
CLAIRE?
NO, NO
I...



THAT
WASN'T THE
ONLY TIME,
JONAH. IT'S
WHAT YOU
DO.

SINCE
FORAGER, YOU'VE
DONE THIS OVER
AND OVER, EVERY
THREE OR FOUR
CYCLES.

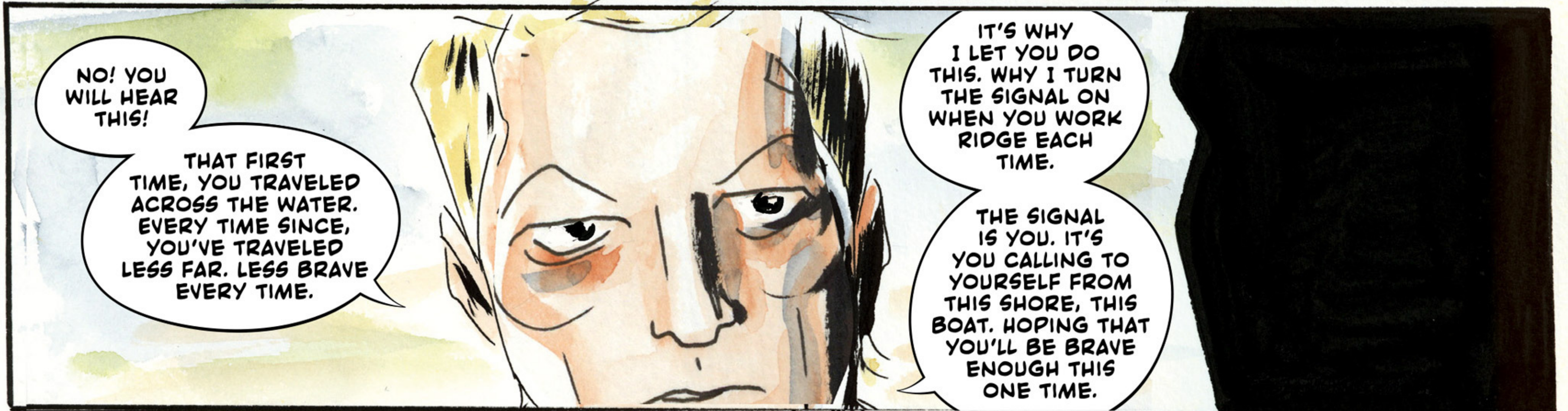
NO. NO,
THAT'S
NOT--

OVER
AND OVER,
JONAH.



YOU FIND YOUR FIRST BOOKS, YOUR NOTES, YOU
WRITE A NEW BOOK, MAKE YOUR LITTLE PLAN, STEAL
THE GIRL IN ONE MANNER OR ANOTHER, AND YOU TRY
TO ESCAPE. THEN YOU COME BACK, BEGGING TO BE
LET BACK IN. OVER AND OVER AND OVER.

I DON'T
BELIEVE
YOU!

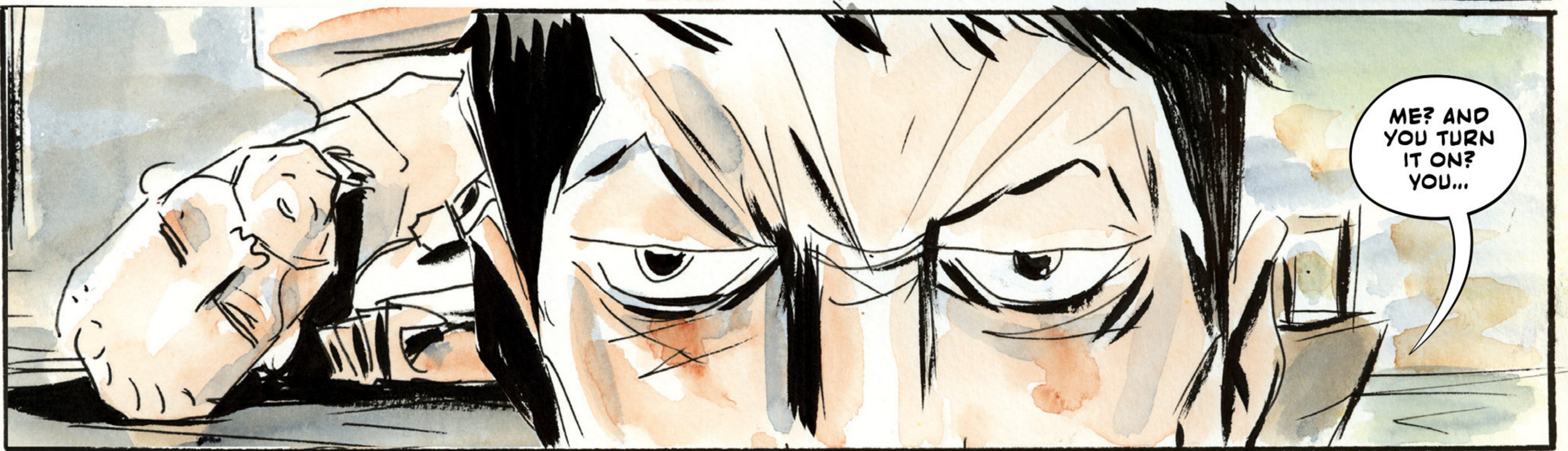


NO! YOU
WILL HEAR
THIS!

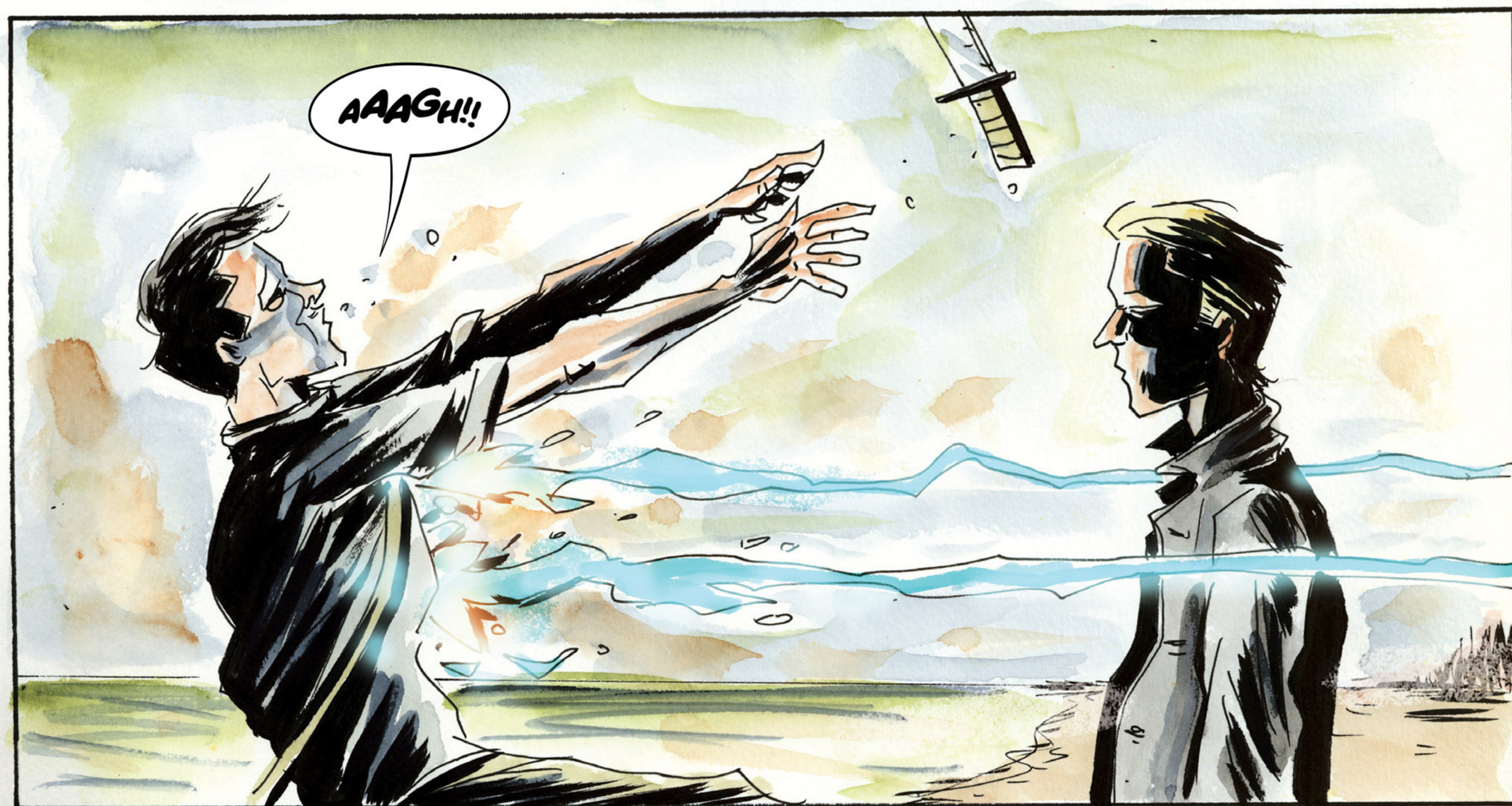
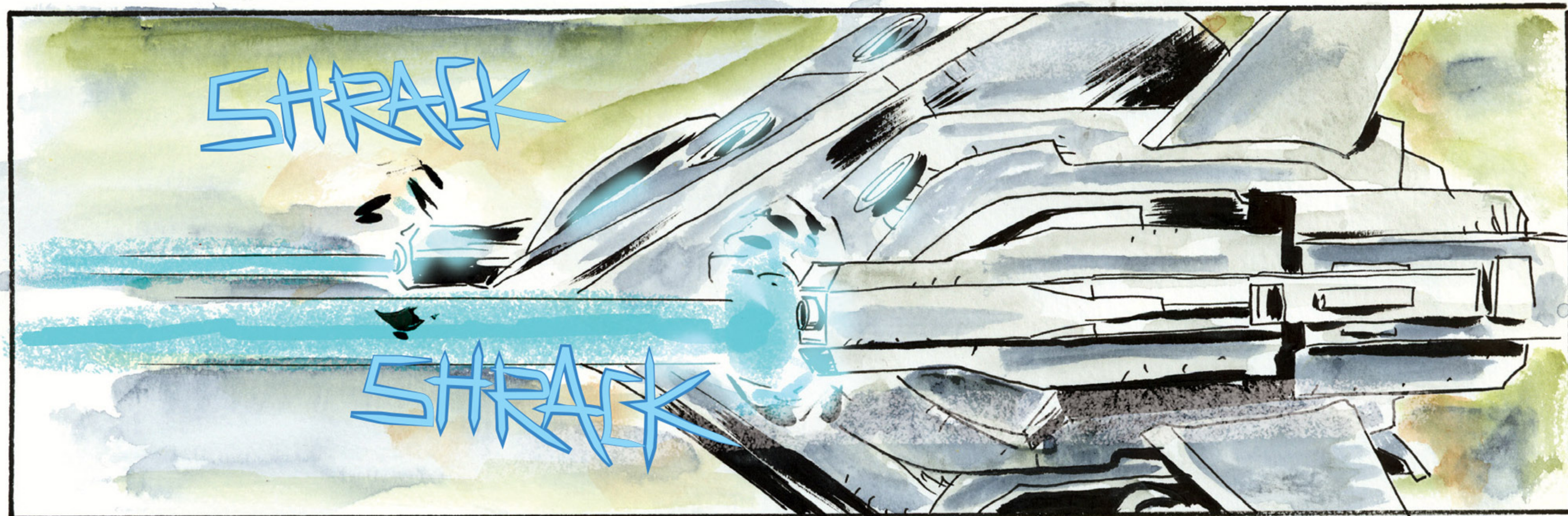
THAT FIRST
TIME, YOU TRAVELED
ACROSS THE WATER.
EVERY TIME SINCE,
YOU'VE TRAVELED
LESS FAR. LESS BRAVE
EVERY TIME.

IT'S WHY
I LET YOU DO
THIS. WHY I TURN
THE SIGNAL ON
WHEN YOU WORK
RIDGE EACH
TIME.

THE SIGNAL
IS YOU. IT'S
YOU CALLING TO
YOURSELF FROM
THIS SHORE, THIS
BOAT. HOPING THAT
YOU'LL BE BRAVE
ENOUGH THIS
ONE TIME.

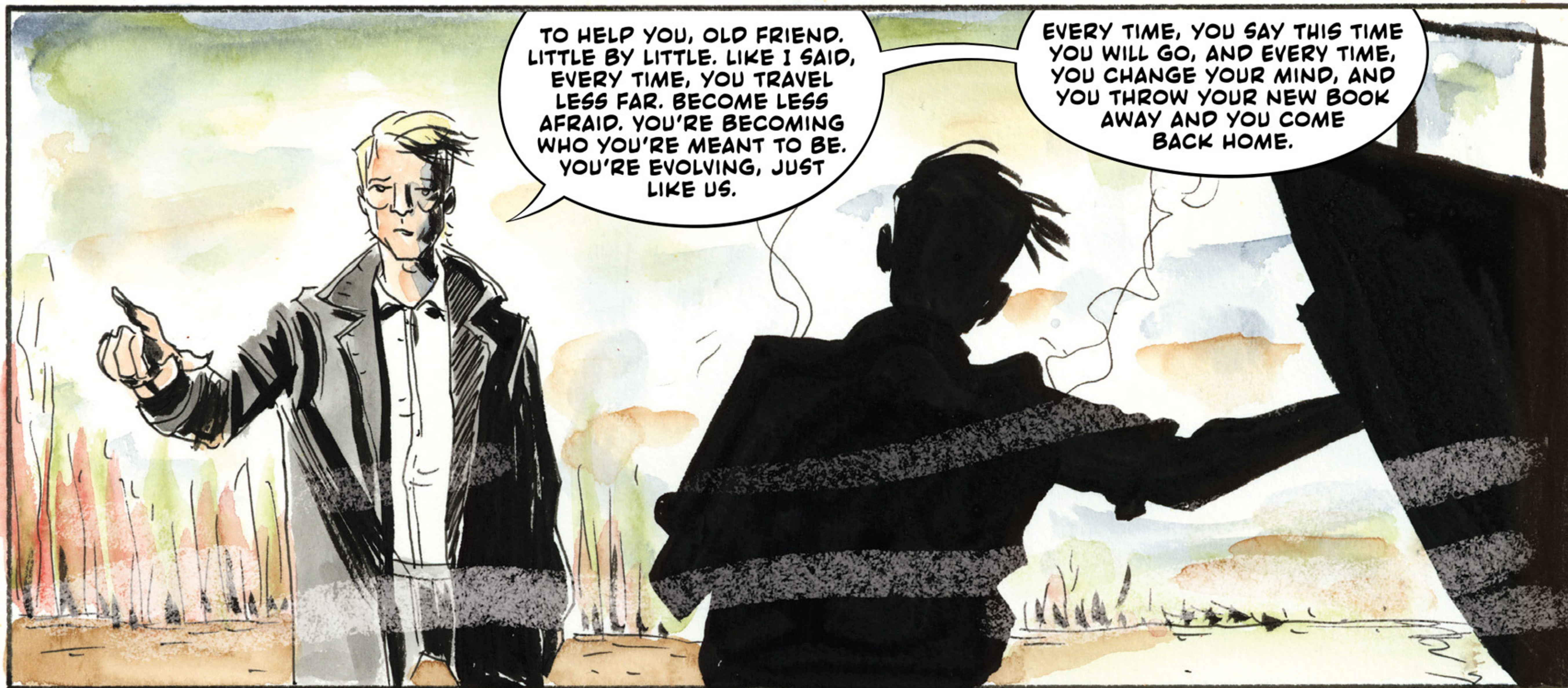


ME? AND
YOU TURN
IT ON?
YOU...



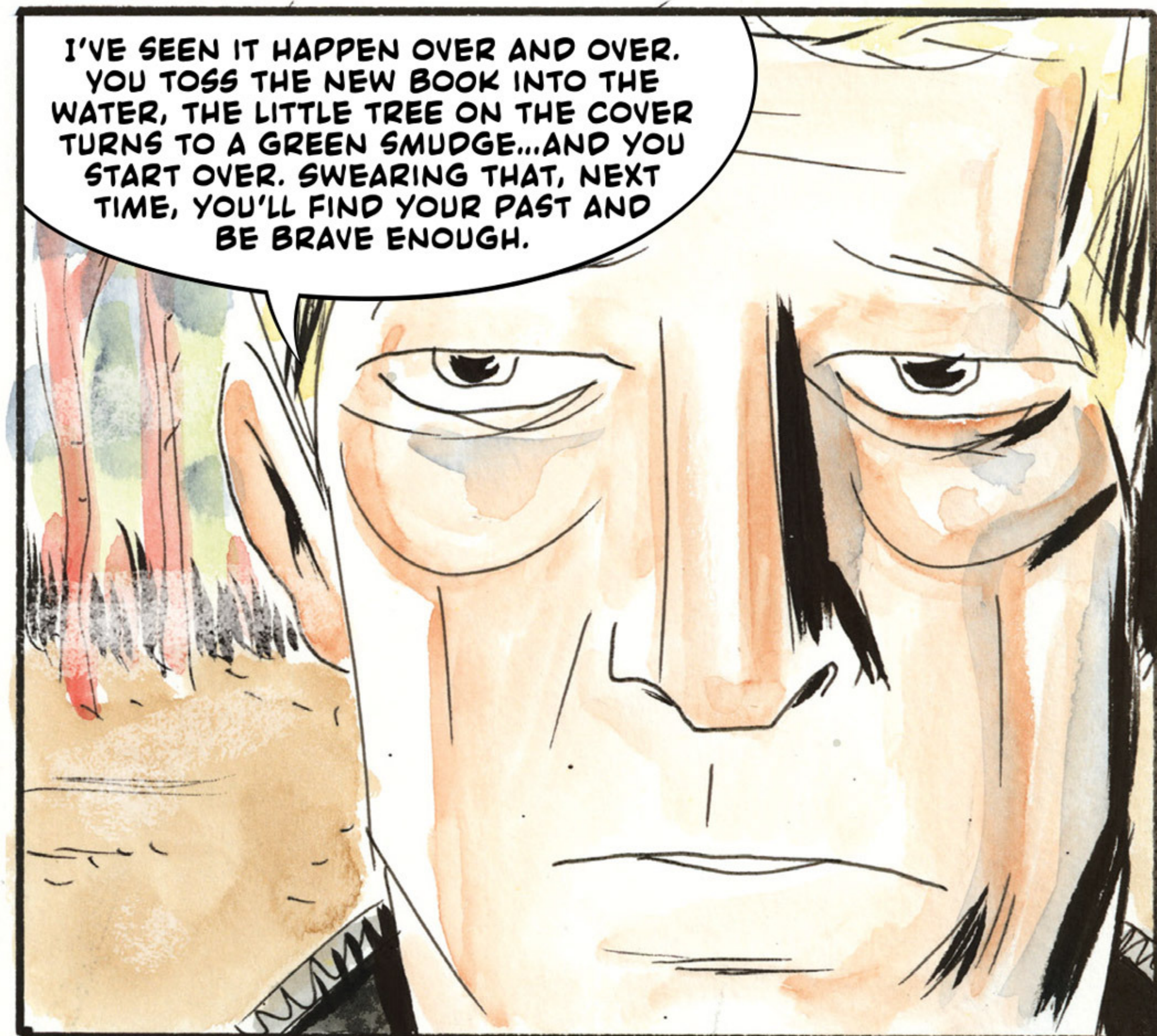


WHY...
WHY WOULD
YOU DO THIS TO
ME? WHY WOULD
YOU SEND THE
SIGNAL...GET ME
TO...DO THIS
IF...

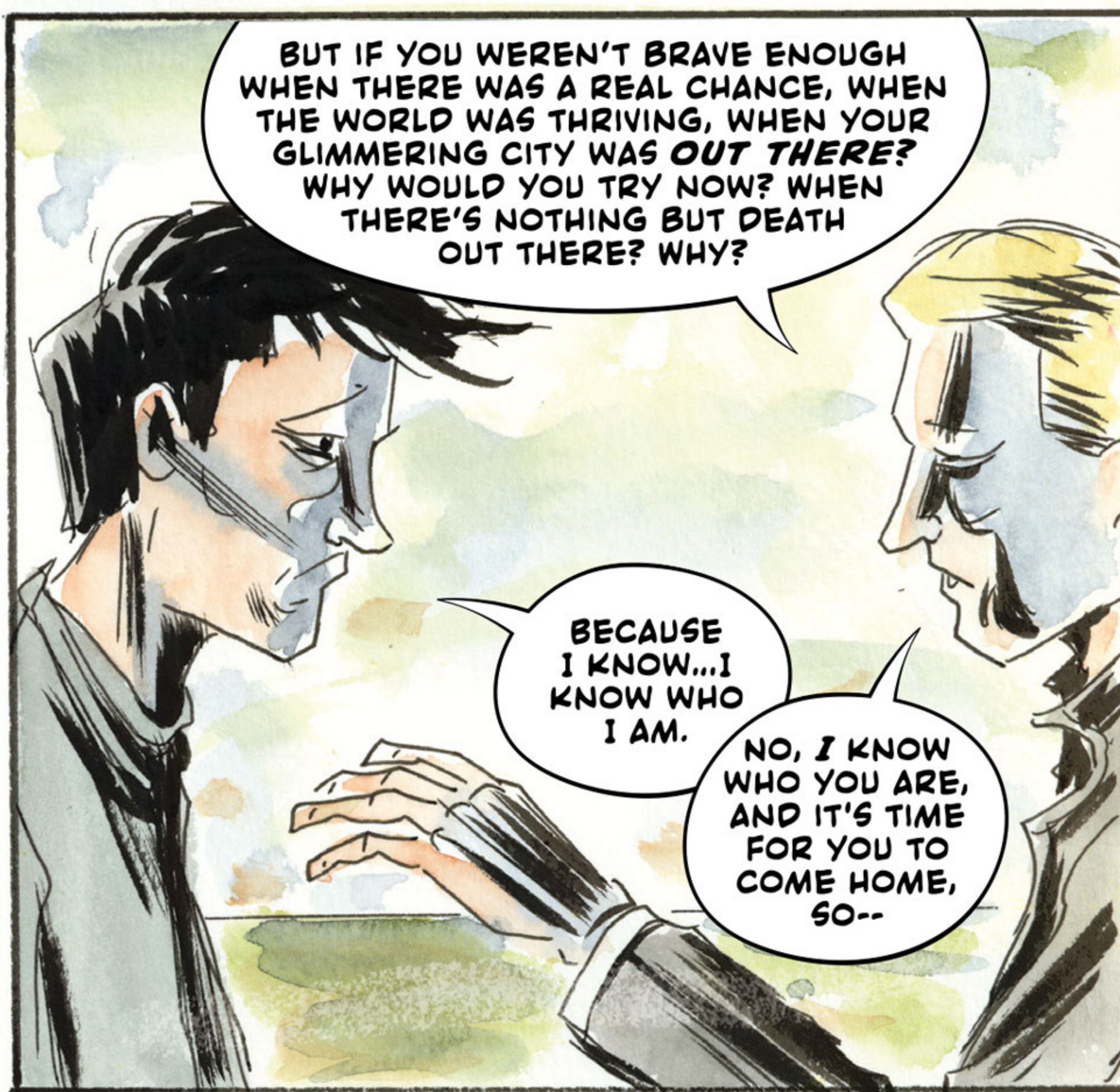


TO HELP YOU, OLD FRIEND.
LITTLE BY LITTLE. LIKE I SAID,
EVERY TIME, YOU TRAVEL
LESS FAR. BECOME LESS
AFRAID. YOU'RE BECOMING
WHO YOU'RE MEANT TO BE.
YOU'RE EVOLVING, JUST
LIKE US.

EVERY TIME, YOU SAY THIS TIME
YOU WILL GO, AND EVERY TIME,
YOU CHANGE YOUR MIND, AND
YOU THROW YOUR NEW BOOK
AWAY AND YOU COME
BACK HOME.



I'VE SEEN IT HAPPEN OVER AND OVER.
YOU TOSS THE NEW BOOK INTO THE
WATER, THE LITTLE TREE ON THE COVER
TURNS TO A GREEN SMUDGE...AND YOU
START OVER. SWEARING THAT, NEXT
TIME, YOU'LL FIND YOUR PAST AND
BE BRAVE ENOUGH.



BUT IF YOU WEREN'T BRAVE ENOUGH
WHEN THERE WAS A REAL CHANCE, WHEN
THE WORLD WAS THRIVING, WHEN YOUR
GLIMMERING CITY WAS *OUT THERE*?
WHY WOULD YOU TRY NOW? WHEN
THERE'S NOTHING BUT DEATH
OUT THERE? WHY?

BECAUSE
I KNOW...I
KNOW WHO
I AM.

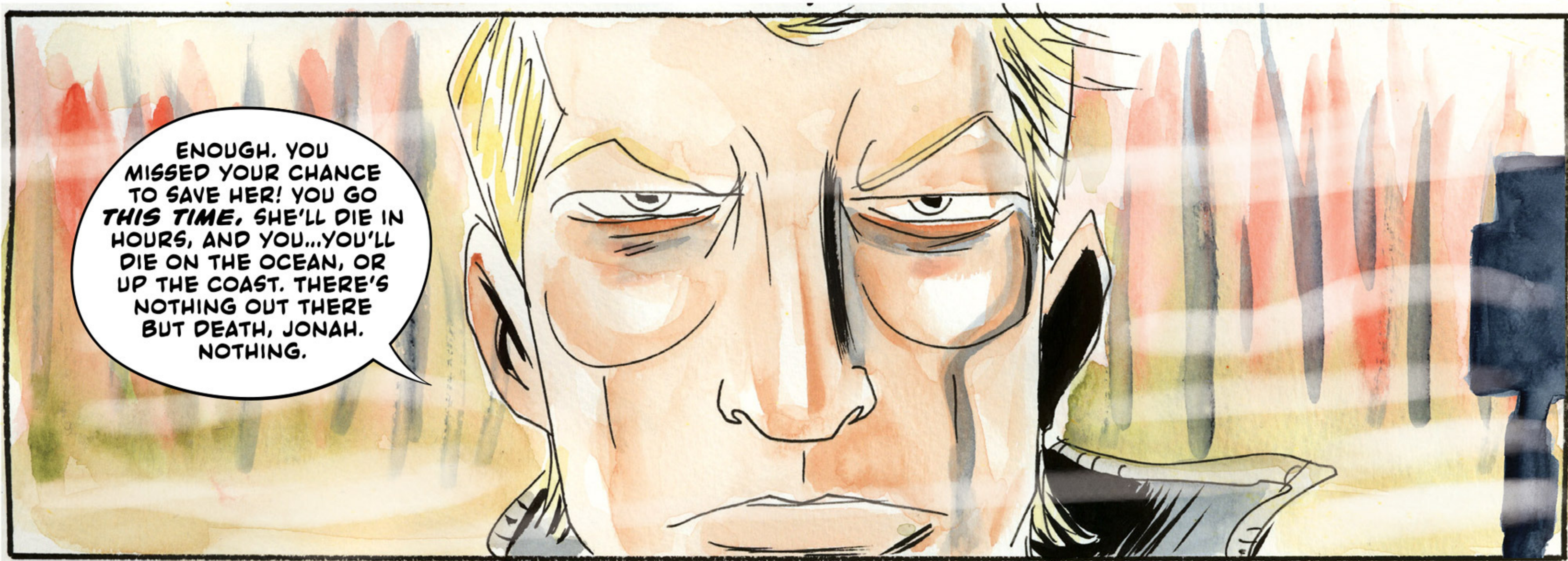
NO, I KNOW
WHO YOU ARE,
AND IT'S TIME
FOR YOU TO
COME HOME,
SO--



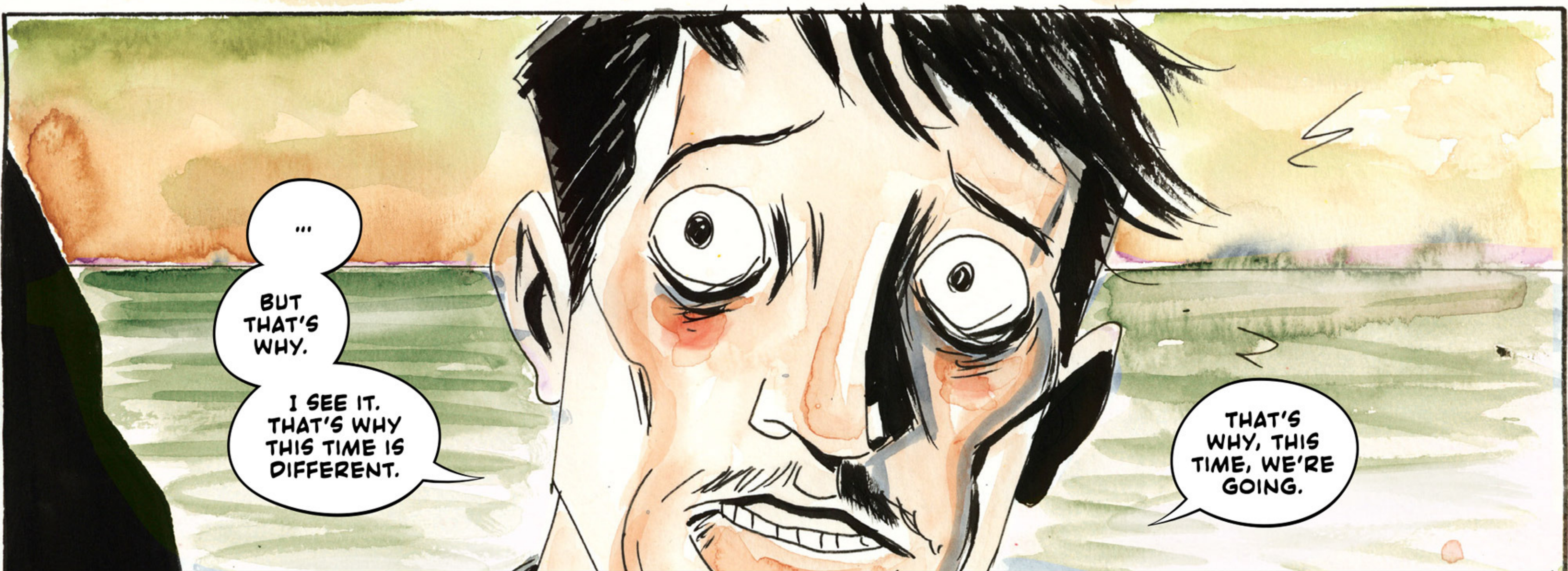
NO.

PLEASE,
JONAH...

LET'S...GO.



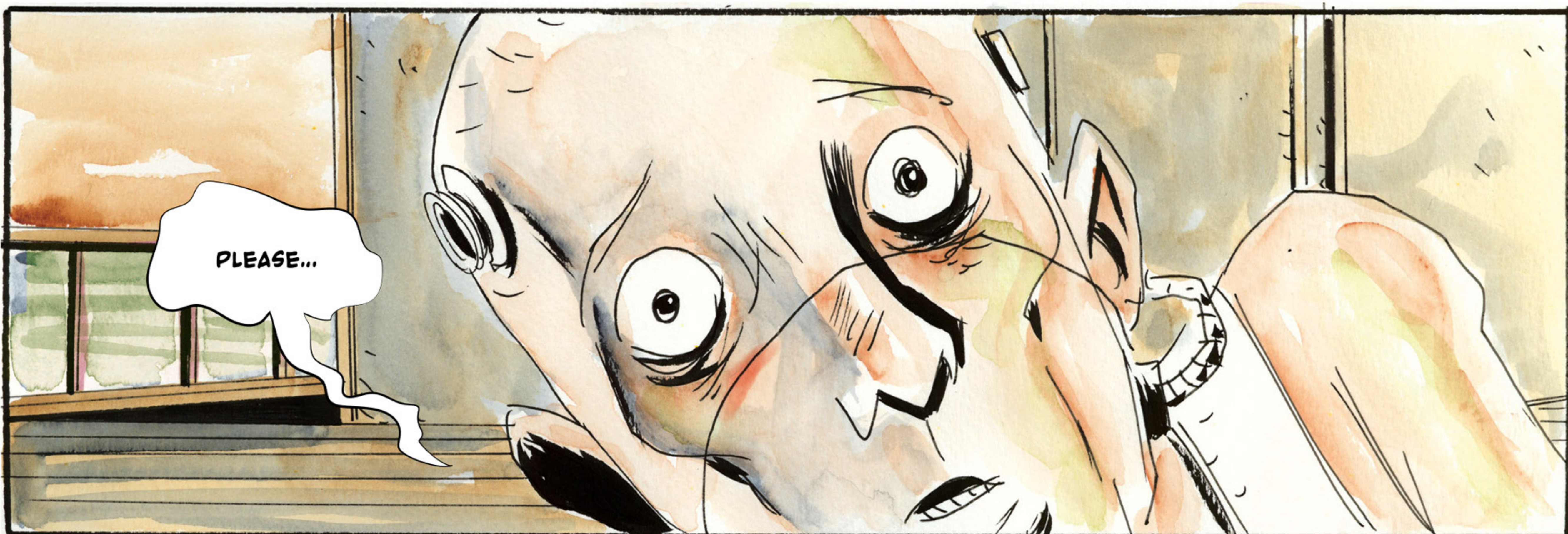
ENOUGH. YOU MISSED YOUR CHANCE TO SAVE HER! YOU GO **THIS TIME**, SHE'LL DIE IN HOURS, AND YOU...YOU'LL DIE ON THE OCEAN, OR UP THE COAST. THERE'S NOTHING OUT THERE BUT DEATH, JONAH. NOTHING.



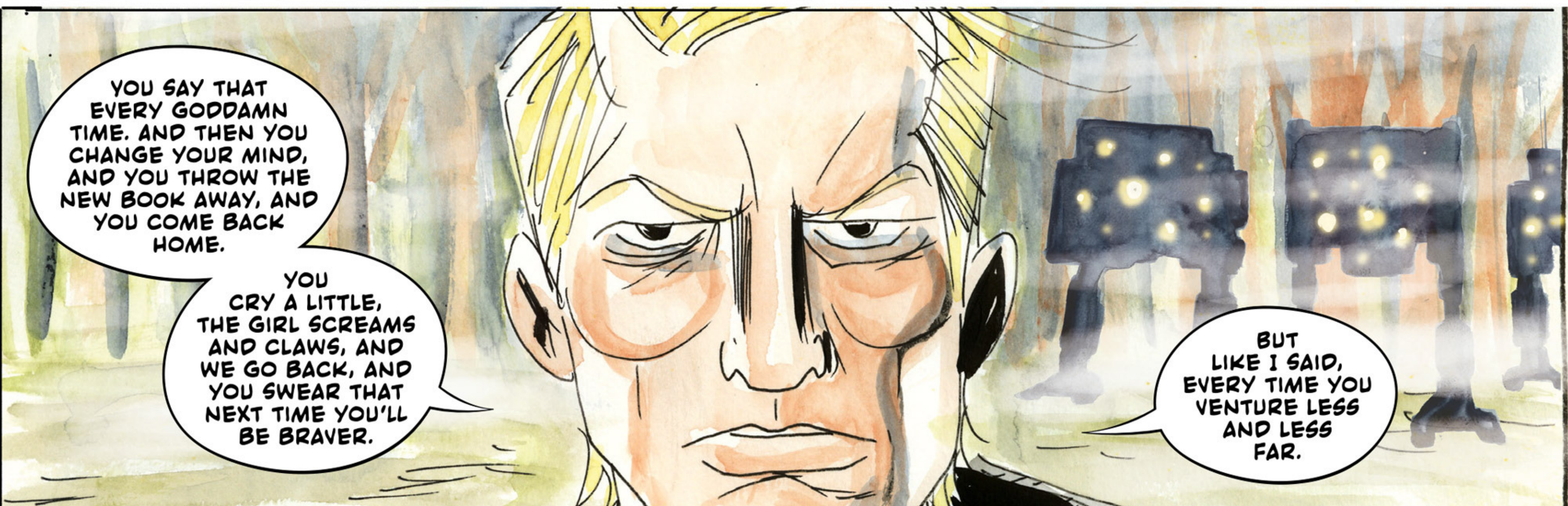
...
BUT THAT'S WHY.

I SEE IT. THAT'S WHY THIS TIME IS DIFFERENT.

THAT'S WHY, THIS TIME, WE'RE GOING.



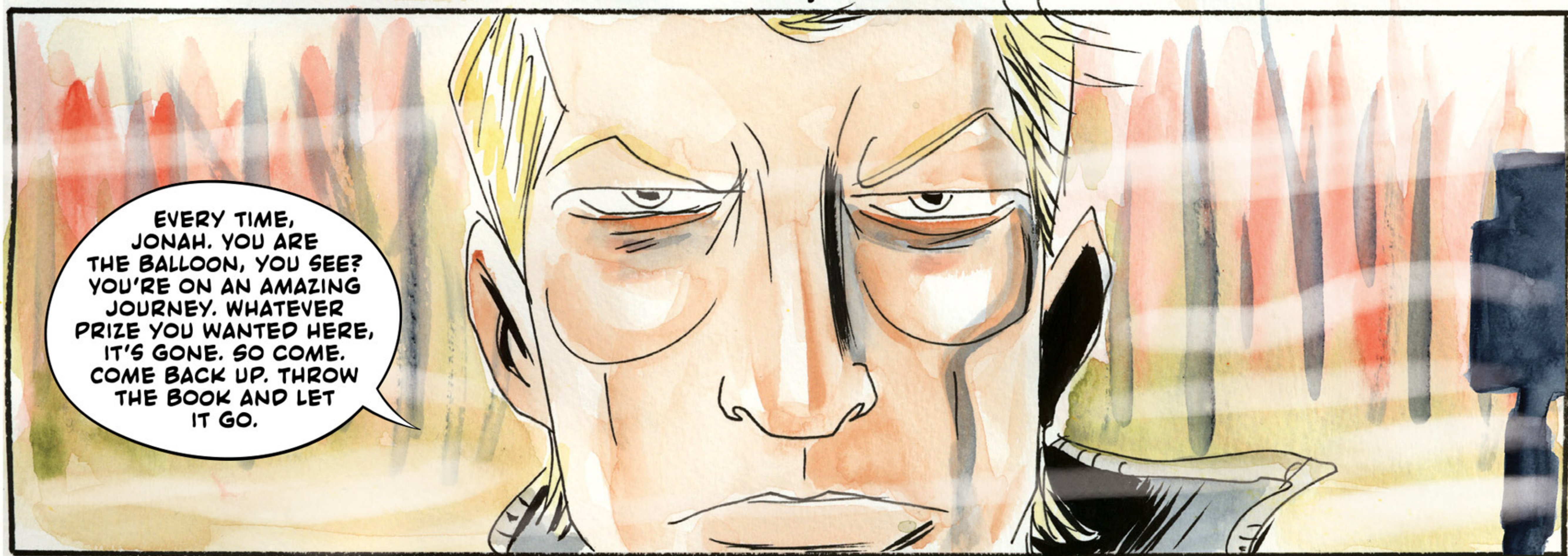
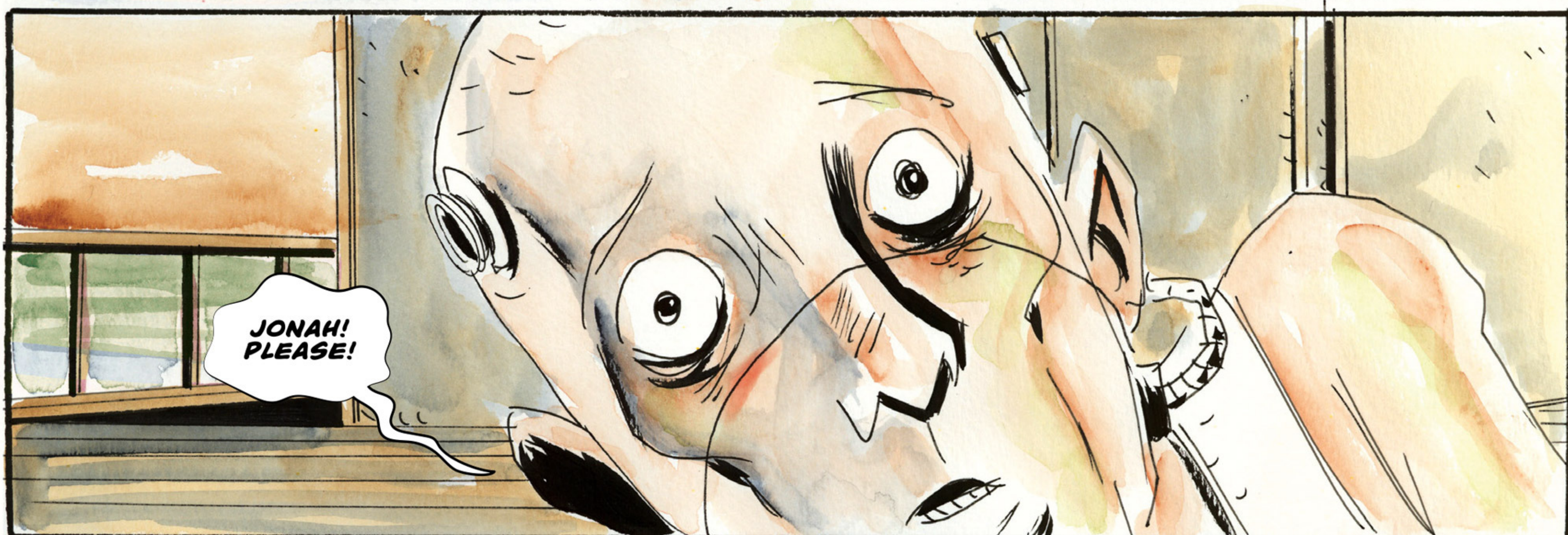
PLEASE...

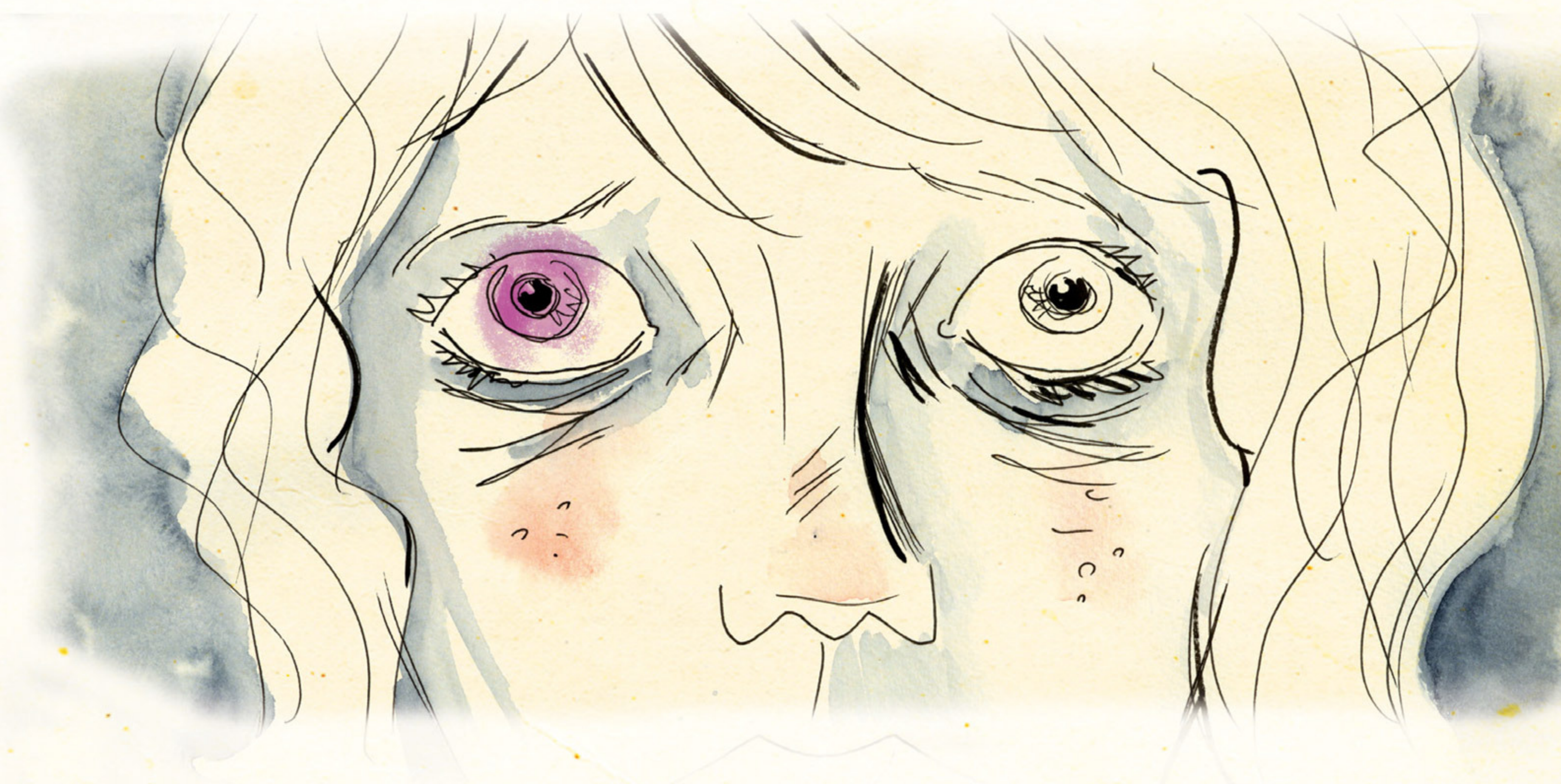
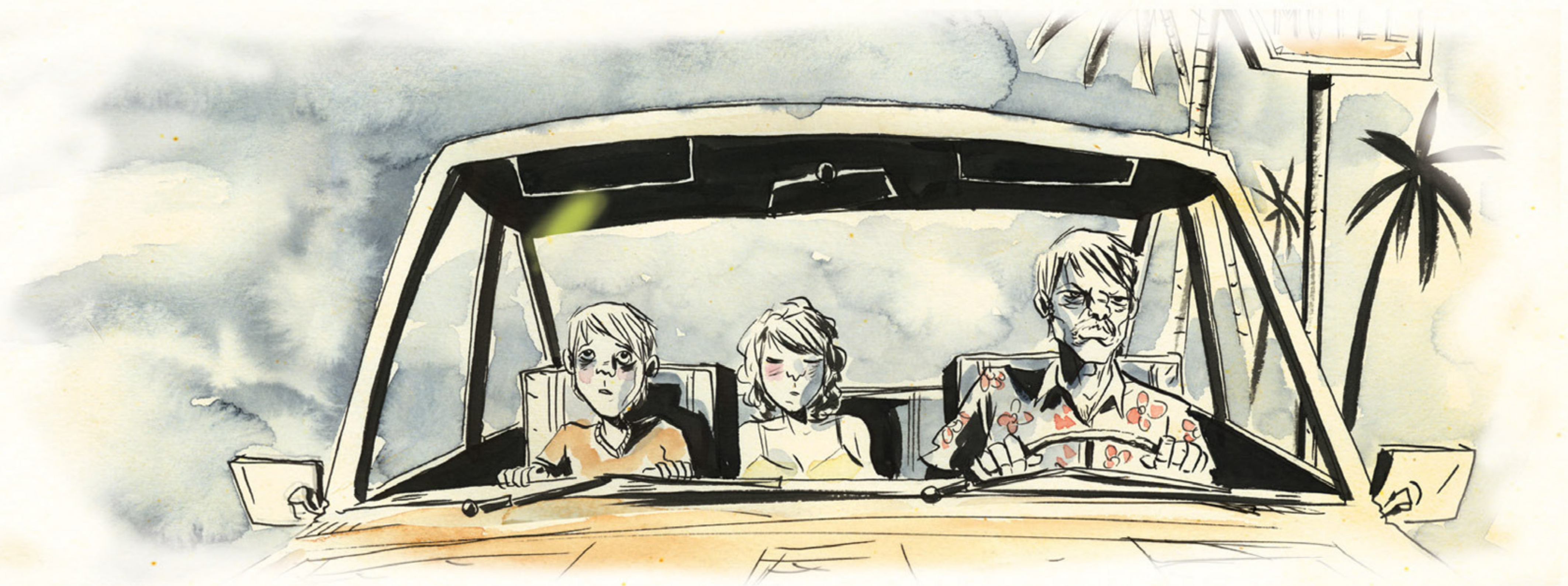


YOU SAY THAT EVERY GODDAMN TIME. AND THEN YOU CHANGE YOUR MIND, AND YOU THROW THE NEW BOOK AWAY, AND YOU COME BACK HOME.

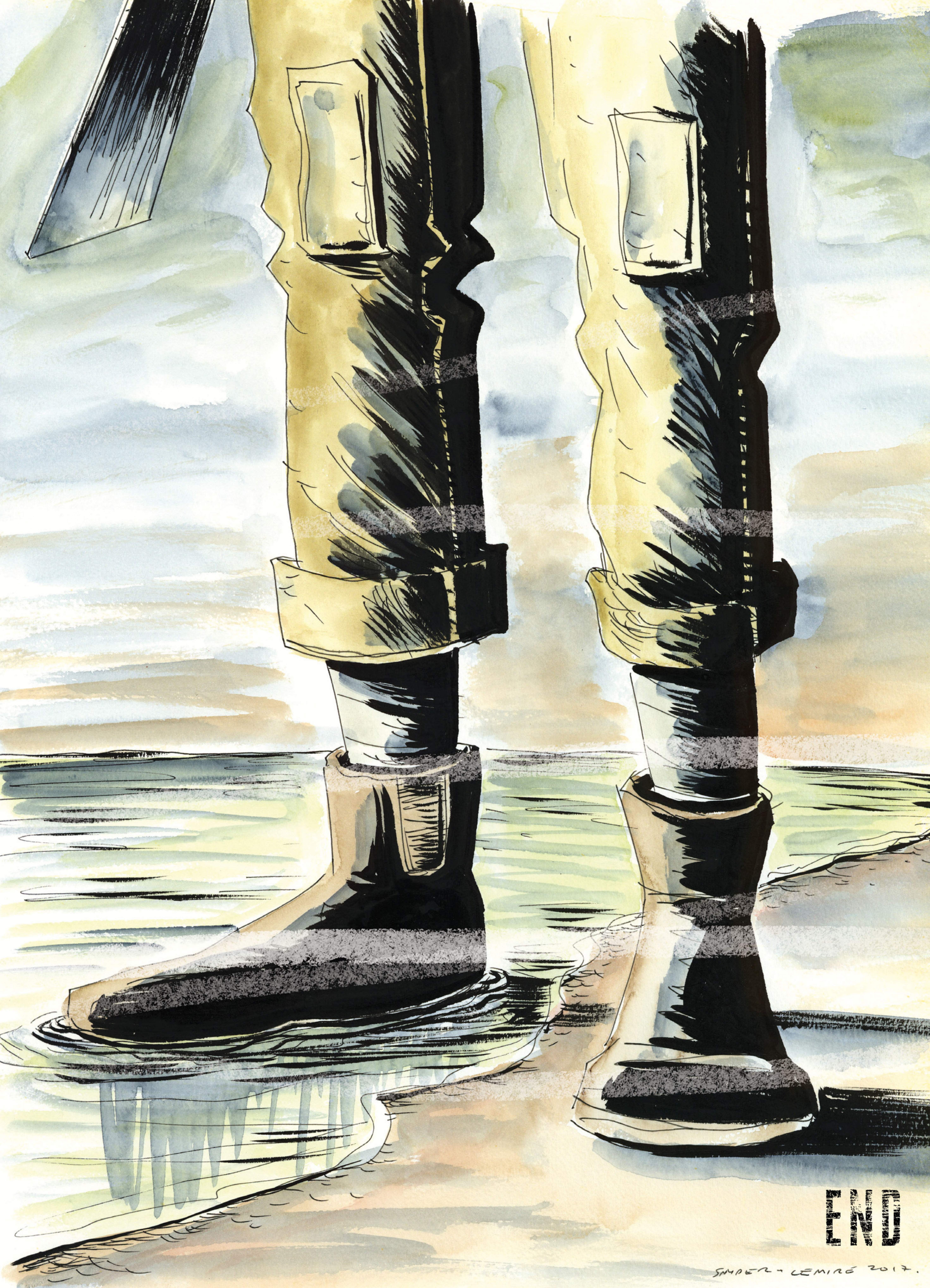
YOU CRY A LITTLE, THE GIRL SCREAMS AND CLAWS, AND WE GO BACK, AND YOU SWEAR THAT NEXT TIME YOU'LL BE BRAVER.

BUT LIKE I SAID, EVERY TIME YOU VENTURE LESS AND LESS FAR.







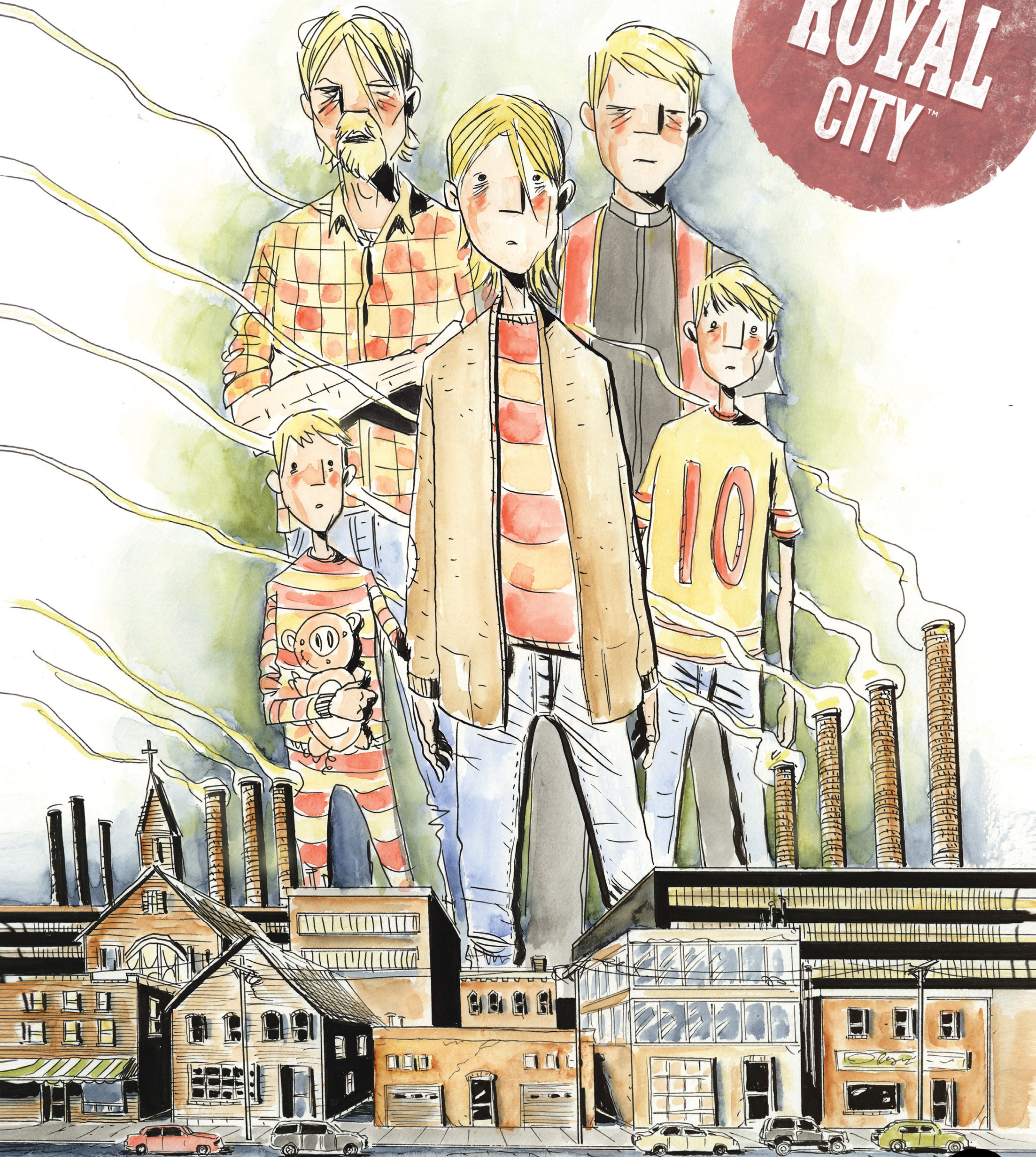


END



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